A Fine Distinction

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/8177459.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal Lecter & Clarice Starling, Will Graham & Clarice Starling
Characters:	Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham, Clarice Starling, Jack Crawford, Ardelia Mapp
Additional Tags:	Murder Husbands, Post-Finale, Canon-Typical Violence, Hannibal is Hannibal, Dark Will, murder husbands at large, Psychopaths In Love, POV Outsider, sort of a case fic, Hurt Will Graham, never underestimate Will Graham, Hannibal likes long discussions
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of When the Devil Smiles Back
Collections:	The Temple Of Athens
Stats:	Published: 2016-10-01 Completed: 2017-12-31 Words: 38,175 Chapters: 8/8

A Fine Distinction

by GoldenUsagi

Summary

Sequel to When the Devil Smiles Back. Three years after Hannibal Lecter's escape in Memphis, Clarice profiles Will Graham. From there, nothing at all goes as expected.

Dr. Lecter moved to pick up his glass, slowly swirling the wine before he took a drink. "It's curious. Twice now our paths have crossed, and each time you have inadvertently reunited me with Will."

Clarice turned that statement over in her head. "Are you saying I'm some sort of good luck?"

He smirked at that, his lips twisting slightly in amusement. "Merely that you have brought serendipity."

Notes

Beta'd by Elaminator, Victorine, and TiggyMalvern!

Chapter 1

Clarice Starling had a box in her closet that she never opened.

On the plane back from Belvedere, she had taken out a notebook and furiously scribbled, writing down everything she could remember from her conversation with Dr. Lecter and Will Graham. From there, the words flowed backwards, and she continued, describing her first meeting with Will, and anything else she could think of about either of them. She only stopped writing when the plane landed.

When she got home, she took the notes and reports she had made after her initial conversations with Dr. Lecter, put them in the new notebook, and shoved it all in the box she kept her old college essays in.

And then she forgot about it.

At least, she didn't think about it, which was nearly the same thing.

Time passed.

Her career was off to a promising start, and while nothing she worked on was as high profile as the Buffalo Bill case, she had more than enough to keep her busy. She contributed to profiles, pored over forensic reports, and was soon being assigned cases of her own. She began to have a high solve rate, and Crawford didn't hold back on giving her the tricky ones, new agent though she was.

What he didn't do, somewhat to her surprise, was give her anything related to Dr. Lecter.

The one time she asked about it, he said, "Catching Hannibal Lecter isn't your concern."

"I just thought, since I had experience with him—"

"No," Crawford said, not glancing up from the papers on his desk. "You got away from him. Leave it at that."

"It's my job to—"

"Your job is whatever I say it is," Crawford barked, head snapping up.

Clarice nodded. "Yes, sir."

He sobered slightly. "Listen up, Starling, because I'm only going to say this once. I'm not losing you to him, too."

Clarice knew that he had lost others, and she knew that it had brought his own career under scrutiny and himself under reprimand. She'd known that Crawford had a rocky career before

she started the program at the Academy, but she hadn't known the finer details until a few months ago, when an offhand comment she heard in passing prompted her to do some in depth research of her own.

When she'd discovered that he had misused his position and had sent people after Dr. Lecter in an unofficial capacity, it hadn't exactly shocked her, but it had made Clarice more aware of how she fell into that pattern. But she didn't hold the past against Crawford; if anything the knowledge had solidified her own principles. She would do her job without question, but she wouldn't be party to anything underhanded in the future, no matter who asked.

But there was nothing suspect about the current situation, and part of her felt like Crawford was now overcompensating for having risked her initially.

"I have no intention of being lost," Clarice said. "And with all due respect, sir, your job isn't to protect me from doing mine."

He sighed. "Sit down, Starling."

She did so.

"With Hannibal, it's always been personal for me," he said slowly. "I can admit that. Sometimes, I can't see past that. And that's gotten all of us to where we are today—which is with Hannibal loose," he emphasized. "If I want another shot at catching him, it has to be by the book. Or I'll be gone for good this time and my only legacy will be a footnote in his twisted story.

"And on a more practical level," Crawford continued, "you're a profiler. We don't need a profile of Hannibal Lecter. What we need is a tip. And when we get a tip, we're not going to send a profiler; we're going to send a SWAT team. That's assuming Hannibal is even in the country, which I doubt. Then, even if we get a tip, it becomes a matter of inter-agency cooperation."

Clarice processed that, unable to find fault with anything he'd said. "Have there been tips?" she asked.

"Barely any in the six months since Hannibal's escape in Memphis, and all of them were bogus. They know how to disappear, and they're not leaving any traces."

There was no question of who 'they' referred to.

"All right," Clarice finally said. "I shouldn't have pressed, but thank you for explaining yourself."

Crawford nodded. "Hannibal Lecter is at the top of the wanted list, but we have nothing to investigate unless we get a legitimate lead. When we do, I'll assign it to someone. It might be you, it might be another agent—whoever I feel is best equipped for the job."

"I understand."

And she did, when it was framed like that. There were new bodies to process every week, and active murders they had evidence on took priority over chasing ghosts overseas.

Clarice wasn't one to dwell on negatives, and she found more than enough satisfaction from catching the killers that she could catch without worrying about the ones she couldn't. Crawford's mistake had been to make it personal, and she wouldn't do that. Dr. Lecter needed to be caught, but she couldn't let solving any case become her life.

Ironically, that advice had come straight from Dr. Lecter.

Time passed.

There were cases, and killers, and eventually, a promotion. It was a title change and a slight raise, though her daily work wouldn't be changing at all. But it was recognition, and while based on her collective efforts, it came after the successful apprehension of a particularly gruesome killer.

Now the day was over and she and Ardelia sat in Clarice's living room sharing a bottle of celebratory wine.

They had worked together several times during Clarice's first few weeks as an official agent. Ardelia was someone Clarice had known in her classes, though they had never been more than acquaintances in passing then.

But she had been pleased to quickly hit it off with Ardelia. They worked well together professionally, and had soon become good friends in general. In the two years since, Clarice could easily say that Ardelia was her best friend, just as she was Ardelia's.

"One more?" Ardelia asked, reaching for the wine bottle with a smile.

"Why not?" Clarice said, holding her glass out. Almost half the bottle was gone, but it wasn't like either of them had to work tomorrow.

Ardelia topped off Clarice's glass before refilling her own.

"So," Ardelia said, "since we've already celebrated your commendation and are definitely going to finish this bottle, we should move on to something that's more fun to talk about while getting drunk."

"Like what?"

Ardelia smiled. "Deep dark secrets?"

Clarice laughed, her head rolling back. "Secrets about what?"

"You. Me." She shrugged. "Anything secret."

"I don't have any secrets."

Ardelia looked unimpressed. “Everyone has secrets. And you know all of mine!”

“I’ve never done anything.”

Ardelia raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry, Ardelia,” Clarice said, taking a drink. “I’ve got nothing. If you’re looking for something like me stealing a car when I was sixteen, you’re going to be disappointed.”

“First, it was my boyfriend’s car, and he said I could borrow it anytime.” Ardelia grinned. “He just didn’t know I would end up taking that literally. And his parents didn’t know at all. Hence the confusion. I was never—”

“—never charged, I know. But—” Clarice spread her hands, “—I’m boring compared to you. I never even snuck into a movie without buying a ticket. You grow up in an orphanage, you either break all the rules, or you become terrified of breaking them. I think somehow I thought that if I did something wrong there, I’d end up somewhere even worse.”

“Okay,” Ardelia said, trying to lighten the mood. “It doesn’t have to be something bad or something you did, just something big, something no one else knows. You have to have *something*.”

Clarice mulled it over. The only thing she could think of was the story of the night she ran away from the ranch, and that wasn’t big or bad, just personal. But she wasn’t opposed to telling Ardelia about it. It would probably do her good to actually share it with someone; it was a something she had kept locked away, something she had only spoken about once—Clarice’s train of thought immediately halted, another thought occurring to her.

She took a drink of wine, a long one, as she turned it over in her head.

When she went for too long without speaking, Ardelia snapped her fingers in Clarice’s direction.

Clarice refocused, still considering. “I suppose it goes without saying that nothing leaves this room?”

Ardelia nodded, leaning forward expectantly.

“Well, there is one thing,” Clarice said. “Though it’s not something no one else knows, and I’m not sure it’s technically a secret. I just… don’t talk about it.”

Ardelia looked like she was resigning herself to hearing disappointing gossip. She gave Clarice a good-natured grin. “You’re not really selling this, you know.”

Clarice met Ardelia’s gaze, pressing her lips together before they turned up in a slow smile. She realized that even though she considered her ‘conversation’ as simply something that had happened in her life, objectively, it ventured into the unbelievable.

“If I shock you enough,” Clarice said, “you have to buy us the next bottle.”

“Fine, but don’t hold your breath.”

Clarice took another drink of wine, before looking Ardelia dead in the eye and saying, “I’ve been alone in a room with Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham.”

For a second, Ardelia didn’t have a reaction. Then she laughed. “Right. Good one.”

“No, really. You know I met Dr. Lecter when he was in prison,” Clarice said, matter-of-fact. “Well, he found me after that.”

Ardelia’s brows rose almost to her hairline and her mouth fell open. “You can’t be serious.” She set her glass down on the coffee table.

Clarice nodded. “I’m dead serious. I sat across a table from both of them, and I walked away in one piece.”

“How?” Ardelia asked, stark disbelief stamped across her face. “When?”

“In Belvedere. The day after I caught Buffalo Bill.” Clarice’s solving of the Buffalo Bill case was well known; the fact that she had consulted Dr. Lecter was less well known, but was in the records for anyone who cared to find it. “They found me right after Dr. Lecter’s escape. The three of us had the conversation Dr. Lecter wanted to have, and then they left together. And that was it.”

Ardelia still looked stunned. “Hannibal Lecter just skipped out on killing a perfectly good FBI agent?”

“Thanks,” Clarice said dryly.

“You know what I mean. No offense, but you dead would have been the perfect way to top off his escape.”

“Crawford said as much,” Clarice said, taking another sip. “Dr. Lecter said to my face that he didn’t have a reason to kill me.” She paused. “I think he would have considered it rude. Or maybe I just amused him.”

“Are you profiling Hannibal Lecter now?” Ardelia’s tone was half-teasing, half-serious. “Because maybe you should be.”

“I don’t pretend to understand him. There’s only one person who does, and he’s certainly not going to be writing any papers on the subject.”

“Well, you must understand something. You’re still here.”

“He found me interesting.” Clarice gave a slight shrug. “Things either interest him or they don’t. And there’s no understanding or predicting that.”

Only a fool would claim to be an authority on Dr. Lecter, and even though Clarice had navigated him well enough, she had no aspirations to share her experiences or to claim that

they were in any way replicable. Beyond being polite, she couldn't point to anything she had done that made him decide he preferred her alive.

"Well," Clarice said after a moment of silence. "I guess this qualifies as a good secret, then?"

"*Yes*," Ardelia said. "I can't believe you've never told anyone this before. Are you under a gag order?"

"No." Clarice hadn't spoken to anyone about her last meeting with Dr. Lecter, not since that morning in Belvedere when she had told Crawford. He had been serious when he'd said that he would be the last person she discussed Dr. Lecter with, as he'd flatly informed her that her formal report shouldn't contain anything beyond the Buffalo Bill case and her encounter with Will Graham at Gumb's.

"So, why is it a secret then?" Ardelia asked, picking up her own glass again and taking a drink. "You could probably get something for a story like that."

Clarice stared at the wine in her glass. "Dr. Lecter's attention is… uncomfortable, even when it's benign. I'm not going to do anything to make him think of me more." She didn't think that talking publicly about her interactions with him and Will would be enough to bring him to call on her, but she wasn't about to do so.

Ardelia raised a brow. "More? Does that mean he thinks of you now?"

Clarice stared at her glass, frowning at the lapse she'd made. She was starting to get too intoxicated for this conversation.

"Clarice."

"He sends me Christmas cards," she said. The cards never contained any personal message, and were tasteful and expensive, with typical season's greetings printed on them. But they were always signed.

Ardelia's mouth fell open again. "Are you serious?"

"Completely."

Ardelia took Clarice's glass and set it down. "All right, you have to tell me everything. Starting with Buffalo Bill."

Clarice did.

She skipped over the bare facts of the Buffalo Bill case, which Ardelia already knew. Instead, she spoke of her original meetings with Dr. Lecter in a broader sense—how he had acted, how he had asked for personal information about her. How he had abducted and drugged her in Belvedere solely to finish that conversation. Clarice told her what they had talked about, even relating the story of the lambs. She told her how neither Dr. Lecter nor Will Graham had shown any interest in killing her, and how at the end, they had simply left.

In a way, it was a strange relief just to tell someone. She had never felt particularly burdened by any of it, but the simple act of saying it out loud felt good.

Ardelia stared at her in rapt attention throughout, never once interrupting. When Clarice was done, Ardelia slowly blinked, exhaled, and then looked at the glass she held in her own hand, before taking a drink and finishing it.

“If I didn’t know you,” Ardelia finally said, “I’d accuse you of making that entire thing up. But,” she continued, “I’m definitely going to have to buy you a bottle of wine. Maybe two. Jesus, you’ll have to show me the Christmas card this year.”

There was a pause. “Well,” Clarice said, “I still have the others.”

Ardelia gaped at that and demanded to see them. Clarice led her to the bedroom, and dug the box out of her closet. The cards were on top, the box only having been opened in the last two years to toss them in.

She passed the envelopes to Ardelia.

Ardelia slowly opened the first one, pulling the card out and opening it to stare at the signature. Then she laid it down in front of her on the carpet before repeating the process with the other one.

When both cards were spread before her, Ardelia stared at them for a moment before giving a minuscule shake of her head. “Hannibal the Cannibal sent these. You actually have mail from Hannibal Lecter. *Personal* mail.” Ardelia gaped at the cards again. She had clearly believed every word Clarice had spoken, but it was like seeing something physical had driven the story home. “Jesus, Clarice, doesn’t this *worry* you?”

“No.”

Clarice had never truly worried, though the continuing one-sided correspondence had been slightly unsettling. She imagined that was half the fun of it for him—it was a polite formality that he enjoyed observing, with the added amusement that it wouldn’t be entirely welcome to the recipient.

“Why not?” Ardelia asked, her expression one of horrified concern. “Because it should.”

“He never includes a recipe,” Clarice said bluntly. “With the others, he does.” Both Drs. duMaurier and Bloom received cards from Dr. Lecter under the care of the FBI. They were stored and never forwarded, with prior permission from the addressees, who had long stopped having regular mailing addresses.

“You said you didn’t understand him. What if you don’t understand this?”

“What I understand is that he had the opportunity to kill me and he didn’t. The last time I saw him, I was helpless. He engineered that, and he left it at that. These?” she said, gesturing at the cards, “These aren’t a threat; they’re his idea of fun.”

Ardelia still looked dubious.

“There was also this,” Clarice said, pulling out the note she’d received after her graduation, where Dr. Lecter had said that their paths wouldn’t cross again.

Ardelia took it, opening the envelope and reading the message on the paper inside. She pressed her lips together, then exhaled heavily. “Does Crawford know about all this?”

“He knows about everything that happened in Belvedere.”

Clarice had never mentioned the cards. They had seemed strangely personal. She was aware that thinking of anything as personal was not entirely recommended, but it was almost like the cards had been a courtesy in their own way.

More than that, she hadn’t wanted there to be cards. Telling someone they existed would be admitting that Dr. Lecter still thought of her. She had assumed that he would forget about her entirely, having more interesting things to occupy his time, and she didn’t quite know what to make of the fact that that hadn’t been the case.

Ardelia picked up the cards, carefully putting them back in their envelopes and handing them to Clarice.

“I can’t say that this seems like anything other than dangerous,” Ardelia said. “But… I suppose I’ll have to defer to your expertise.”

“I’m not an exp—”

“Apparently you are,” Ardelia cut her off, giving her a completely serious look. “Maybe you don’t understand him clinically, but you understand him in relation to you. You survived—that’s not nothing.”

Clarice put the cards back in the box, her eyes falling on the notebook that she hadn’t opened since she wrote it. For the first time in years, she wondered exactly what it said.

“Have you ever tried to profile him?” Ardelia asked.

“Profiling him won’t help catch him,” Clarice said. “There are dozens of profiles on Dr. Lecter.”

“But have you tried? Or even written something up, just for yourself, as an exercise?”

“No, I haven’t.” Clarice stared at the notebook, which was a transcription of dialogue from memory, but nothing more. “Maybe I should.”

Clarice did not start on a profile of Dr. Lecter immediately.

It was hardly a priority, but more than that, she knew she needed to be in the right headspace to work on it. On a night two weeks later, she pulled out the notebook she’d written, curled up on her couch, and began to read.

It was strange, revisiting things she hadn't closely examined in years. While her memory was accurate, and she found nothing to challenge her overall impression of the experience, reading over conversations that were in some cases nearly word for word was an interesting exercise. Clarice was glad that she'd had the foresight at the time to make a record. There was nothing she read that she didn't remember once prompted, and it all seemed very familiar as she went through it, but it wasn't something she could have created from memory today.

Once finished with the notebook and all that it contained, Clarice set it aside and took out a new pad of paper and a pen. She made a few immediate observations in bullet format at the top of the page.

Then she stared blankly at what she'd written, unsure of where to go from there.

Part of the problem was that she was doing the profile backwards. Her job entailed looking at crime scenes and looking at victims, and using the evidence left behind to narrow down the characteristics of the person behind the acts, to hopefully predict their pattern and lead to their arrest.

This was not that. She wasn't looking at Dr. Lecter's patterns; she was looking at Dr. Lecter himself.

Clarice clicked her pen several times, not able to find anything to say other than the obvious. That was the problem; everything that could be said about him had been said. Right or wrong, it had all been said. And while Clarice flattered herself that she could manage to write things about him that were correct, she found herself unable to come up with anything other than a bare list of facts.

A list of facts did not make a profile, and they certainly didn't show understanding.

She sighed and put the notebooks away, deciding to try another time. Sometimes she did her best thinking when she wasn't actively thinking; maybe all she needed to do was let her brain reflect on things by itself for a while.

For the rest of the evening, she didn't think of Dr. Lecter once. She made dinner and went through her nightly routine.

When she was brushing her teeth, she had the idle thought that doing the profile was wasting her time. There were already dozens of profiles of Dr. Lecter. There was no point in doing another unless it was going to help catch him, and a profile wasn't going to help catch him. He had no traceable motive, and if he was caught, it would be because of dumb luck.

Dumb luck or Will Graham.

Clarice blinked, having the proverbial light bulb moment.

Obviously Will Graham was not going to catch him this time, but an idea had been triggered. What she needed to be doing was profiling Will Graham.

The next night, Clarice was at her kitchen table, her notebook and papers spread before her. She had the urge to work, as well as the familiar spark of inspiration that she got when she knew she was onto something.

She started ripping pages out of the notebook, putting them into two piles: information on Will Graham, and information not on Will Graham. Everything that was related solely to Dr. Lecter or their conversations about her, she put into another folder and placed to the side. Then she began reading the pages that mentioned Will, highlighting anything that stuck out at her and spreading the pages over the table.

While she didn't have proof, Clarice recognized that Will was a killer. What she needed to figure out was what type of killer he was. Dr. Lecter couldn't be traced, but he was with Will, and perhaps Will could be.

When she was done, Clarice looked at the pages arranged before her, eyes skimming over the highlighted parts as she tried to put together the pieces.

Will had done something brutal to Jame Gumb, and what he had said to her at Gumb's house could only be interpreted to mean that he had originally intended to kill Gumb himself. Her own observations about Will at the time had been that he was incredibly intelligent and effortlessly manipulative. As such, there was surprisingly little that was of use to her from her own conversations with him. He had danced around issues and in several cases flatly refused to answer her questions.

He and Dr. Lecter spoke a language they both understood, and she had been on the edge of it in Belvedere. The three of them had exchanged words, but some of the points that they had traded between themselves seemed just beyond her reach. Will had shown no interest in killing her, but a great deal of interest in killing Jame Gumb. But the same could be said for Dr. Lecter in a way, and Will didn't have Dr. Lecter's whimsy. What she needed to figure out was why Will was interested in one but not the other.

Clarice pored over her notes again, considering each point she had marked and mentally weighing it. She copied down several lines that struck her as important onto a new page.

Clicking her pen several times, Clarice looked over her work. An image was beginning to form in her head, a profile that seemed incredibly likely.

It wasn't anything Will had said. But perhaps it was somewhat fitting that the two lines that solidified her theory had come straight from Dr. Lecter.

'This killer would have been too much for Will to ignore.'

'Will would get nothing from killing you.'

The first had been in reference to Gumb, and the last had followed Dr. Lecter's comments that the only reason to kill was to achieve a desired end.

If Will would have gotten nothing from killing her, what would he have gotten from killing Gumb? Her gut response was *satisfaction*. Will had wanted to satisfy something, or he wouldn't have mutilated Gumb's body the way he had. And it was definitely situational, or simply taking apart any body would have done for him.

Clarice realized that when she'd encountered Will in Memphis he had been hunting Gumb. He hadn't just been looking into the case, he hadn't been drawn back into catching killers because of a national headline—he'd been hunting Gumb as surely as any killer hunts their victims.

Buffalo Bill had been too much for Will to ignore because he'd been sensational, because he had been the worst serial killer since the Tooth Fairy.

Will enjoyed killing other killers.

It wasn't an entirely surprising conclusion to draw, given that he was former law enforcement. On her pad, Clarice wrote:

Will Graham = Vigilante

She stared at it a moment. It was close, but not quite right. On the surface, his actions might look like those of a vigilante, but the motivation seemed wrong. After another moment, she crossed it out and wrote:

Will Graham = Righteous killer

Clarice clicked her pen again, then underlined the words with satisfaction.

It was an excellent starting point.

Chapter 2

Clarice fleshed out her profile of Will over the next few days, but after that, she wasn't quite sure what to do with it. She was certain Crawford wouldn't welcome a profile of Will Graham declaring him a righteous killer, especially since he'd told her that Dr. Lecter and Will weren't currently her concern.

However, her own profile had made Clarice interested in what else had been said about Will over the years. She couldn't find any instance of him being officially profiled. There were the statements Dr. Chilton had made at his trial, as well as comments made to the press that his own research on Will Graham would be forthcoming. However, when all charges against Will had been dropped and Dr. Chilton had been framed as the Chesapeake Ripper, Dr. Chilton's analysis of Will had never seen the light of day.

There were the expected articles in the Tattle Crime archives, including an interview Will had actually given to Freddie Lounds, though there wasn't anything of real substance there. Freddie Lounds was prolific, but she could hardly be described as a balanced source.

Except for a brief period of time when Will had been in the public eye, there had been more interest in Dr. Lecter than there had been in him, at least in academic circles. In the media, Will's story had also been overshadowed by Dr. Lecter's, but Will had gotten a fair amount of press in his day. Then after Dr. Lecter's second escape, when it had gotten out that not only was Will Graham alive, but that he and Dr. Lecter were together at large, a fair amount of talk had been generated.

There were the Tattle Crime forums, of course, but Clarice also found other, even less savory, places online. She knew, objectively, that many serial killers had cult followings and even received marriage proposals while incarcerated, but reading comments from people who seemed to revere Dr. Lecter and Will Graham was extremely disturbing.

But in general, Will remained a mystery, both to academics and to the public at large. And while Clarice was satisfied with her profile, she was at a loss to see a practical use for it, at least just at the moment.

It was very likely he and Dr. Lecter weren't even in the country. And even if they were, Will was the best profiler the FBI had ever had, and his particular gifts would make him very hard to catch. How could anyone predict the movements of a killer who was hunting targets the FBI didn't have a lead on to begin with?

Clarice pursed her lips. She knew there was an answer there; she just had to figure out what it was.

Time passed.

Clarice set aside her project on Will Graham, and instead used her free time to unwind after stressful days. There were weeks at a time when she had enough killers on her plate without figuratively taking others home with her.

She mentally thought of her profile of Will as her pet project, but she was still resolved in not making it her very own crusade. She had personal interest in catching them, but she didn't have a personal vendetta, and she didn't let herself become obsessed. Clarice considered it an unofficial side project that hadn't panned out yet; if she ever had a legitimate breakthrough, she would take it to Crawford.

She did start paying extra attention to any particularly grisly murders that came through Behavioral Sciences, but there was nothing about them that made her think any were related to Will Graham.

Once or twice, Clarice used the FBI's access to international databases to look for any unusual murders abroad, but it was just more of the same.

Life went on.

The holidays soon arrived, and with them, another Christmas card from Dr. Lecter. It had an elegant print of holly leaves on the front, with his signature beneath the standard printed message inside. Clarice inspected the envelope, but as always, there were no clues as to its starting point.

She tucked the card away with the others.

Clarice wondered why she was keeping them at all. They were hardly evidence; the FBI received similar cards every year that were inspected and filed, for all the good it did.

It just seemed impolite to throw them away.

It was weeks later that Clarice had her first real breakthrough about how her profile could lead to anything. She had been working on a completely different case when the thought struck her.

Instead of watching for murder victims that seemed like the work of Dr. Lecter or Will, what she needed to be doing was looking for unsolved serial killer crimes.

Clarice realized the absurdity of the statement on the surface. After all, looking at unsolved crimes was what Behavioral Sciences did all day long. But she needed to be looking at them in a different light. She didn't need to look at the ones they were currently trying to solve; she needed to look at the ones that were on their way to becoming cold cases.

If Will was killing killers, those cases would likely never be solved. Even if he had displayed his victims, it might not have been done in a way that allowed them to be connected to the victims of his victim.

The prospect of going through cold cases without knowing exactly what she was looking for was daunting. Clarice began slowly, making notes on the locations of victims, notes on the killer's profile, and most importantly, if the killer had gone silent for a longer period of time than normal.

It was a project she only worked on sporadically, being slow going as well as the least rewarding use of her time. She briefly considered going to Crawford and telling him her theory, in a bid to get more manpower on the project, but she suspected he wouldn't assign more agents or be pleased. When she found an actual pattern, she could go to him. Until then, this whole project was based on an informed hunch.

Clarice also considered bringing Ardelia in, but dismissed that idea quickly. Even though this was grunt work and nothing more, she didn't want Ardelia involved. On the incredibly slim chance that this did lead to Dr. Lecter's arrest, she didn't want Ardelia near anything that had to do with capturing him. She knew enough of Dr. Lecter to know that even the barest involvement with him meant nothing was safe. While Clarice knew Ardelia would scoff at her precautions and would gladly sort through paperwork with her, she couldn't bring herself to ask Ardelia to assume the risk, despite the risk they both assumed every day.

But Clarice's work went nowhere quickly. Some killers went months or even years without killing again. There was nothing that pointed to them being stopped by any force other than their own urges. She knew the chance of her finding anything was unlikely, but she had to try.

There were several cases that she followed up on, making a few calls to clarify things, but there was nothing strange enough to merit more attention. Once, she even made a day trip to a small town in North Carolina to review the locations of former crime scenes of a killer who had dropped a body a week for five weeks before simply stopping. But she couldn't find anything out of the ordinary to suggest that he had been stopped by someone else.

Clarice kept at it, reviewing old files in her down time, even though she was beginning to think it was an exercise in futility.

Then she came across the case from Minnesota.

Three girls dead—Mary Andrews, Erica Jones, and Holly Ferguson.

She remembered the investigation of it, though at the time she had been working a case involving a killer in Kentucky who was murdering hitchhikers by dragging them behind his truck. But nearly a year ago, six separate pieces of a girl were found scattered throughout her hometown in Minnesota, leading to a day of grisly discoveries for unsuspecting residents. Two months later, there had been another girl found divided the exact same way in the next town up the highway, then another body roughly three months after that in the following town. Residents of the fourth town on the road were understandably alarmed, but there hadn't been another body since.

It had been in no way long enough to assume that the killer wasn't still operating. And while his pattern suggested that another body should have appeared by now, it was also not impossible that the killer simply hadn't had the opportunity to kill again. This was hardly a cold case.

And yet there was something about the case that made her reluctant to dismiss it. The case that had brought Dr. Lecter and Will Graham into each other's path had been in Minnesota. The Hobbs case had been ten years ago, but besides the victims being young women, the cases had nothing else in common. The killer's methods were completely different, and the bodies had been found in the northern part of the state, near one of the national forests.

There was certainly nothing to suggest any sort of legitimate connection to Will. There was nothing even to suggest any tentative connection to Will, besides her own ideas of Will and her growing gut feeling that this was important somehow.

As Clarice dug deeper into the case, she found nothing that hadn't been found before, but that still didn't quell her feeling that she *could*, if only she could see things from just the right angle. She was aware that she was looking at things from a different angle to begin with, if she was operating under the assumption that this killer wouldn't kill again because he himself had already been killed.

After several weeks of spending her free time looking at case notes and mapping locations on Google Street View, Clarice decided she simply needed to go for herself. It was a long shot, and she knew that she would probably find nothing, but the idea wouldn't let go of her. She had the same feeling that she'd had the one and only time she'd bought a lottery ticket: the logical acknowledgement that she had a better chance of being struck by lightning than winning, combined with the passionate conviction that it didn't matter because she was going to win (she hadn't).

Clarice knew she would most likely find nothing, but she couldn't stop thinking of the possibility that she might. Once decided, she was then faced with the logistics of the trip. She didn't have enough to go to Crawford with; what she had in general was a wild theory that hinged on two lines Dr. Lecter had spoken three years ago, and what she had specifically was a supposition based on that theory that Will Graham had done away with a killer in Minnesota even though there was no evidence for it whatsoever.

Walking around looking for something to substantiate her profile of Will Graham in what was basically an arbitrary location was not something Crawford was going to support. But if she found something, she could take her profile of Will to him, get more manpower on the task of creating parameters for what they should be looking for in the future.

Clarice resolved to make the trip on her own time.

It had been a relatively slow week at work, all things considered, and she arranged to take Friday off. She again considered telling Ardelia, but rejected the idea. If she told Ardelia, Ardelia would insist on coming. And while Clarice ultimately would not make a trip by herself if she thought it was going to be dangerous, she couldn't eliminate the possibility of finding exactly what she was looking for.

Clarice's highest hope for this trip was finding a lead, no matter how small. But it had occurred to her that the absolute worst case scenario would be running into Dr. Lecter and Will. There was nothing to suggest that they had even been in Minnesota recently, let alone were still there, but better that she chance encountering them by herself than to put Ardelia into Dr. Lecter's path.

As it was, Clarice considered this a fact finding mission. She would talk to the people involved in the original investigation, see the towns for herself, and show Will's picture at gas stations and hotels. Hunting required time, and if Will had hunted the Minnesota killer, he had to have been in the area for at least a few days, even if it had been months ago.

If she found something, she would call Crawford. If she found something immediate, she would call for backup.

Whenever the time came, Clarice had no illusions about arresting Dr. Lecter and Will herself. She fully agreed with Crawford about utilizing a SWAT team. And even though her efforts had been focused on Will, Dr. Lecter's arrest had always been part of the goal. It was simply that she had a theory on Will's possible movements, whereas on Dr. Lecter's she had none.

But on whatever future day arrests were made, it had to be both of them, or there would be hell to pay. If there was one thing that *would* bring Dr. Lecter to her door, it would be taking Will Graham away from him.

At the end of the week, Clarice set off from work on Thursday evening, ready for the long trip ahead of her. She had decided to waste her time rather than her money; even though the drive was over eighteen hours, a round trip plane ticket this late would have been more than a thousand dollars.

Clarice left at five o'clock. She planned to drive until midnight and find a roadside hotel, and then begin again bright and early.

She had lied to Ardelia, the only person to whom she actually had to account for her whereabouts. Clarice felt horribly guilty over the lie, though she had no guilt over protecting Ardelia from something that she herself was already involved in. She had told Ardelia that she was taking a weekend to get away and decompress. It was something Clarice actually did several times a year, so Ardelia hadn't thought it at all strange, nor would she think it strange not to hear from Clarice until Sunday.

The drive was long and boring, and the hotel she stayed at was the standard fare. But she made good time on Friday, arriving at the town the first body had been found in around six-thirty in the evening. She was exhausted, but made the most out of the last daylight to find the sites where remains had been left.

There was nothing remarkable about any of them. A trail in a public park, a delivery entrance at the back of a downtown store, a residential street—all were easily accessible and had allowed the killer to do his business unseen in the dark of early morning. He had left limbs, a torso, and a head scattered around the town like grisly unwrapped packages.

Clarice hadn't expected to find anything at the sites, but she had wanted to get a sense of them. After that, she visited motels and gas stations, showing a picture of Will, as well as a separate picture of Dr. Lecter, and asking if anyone remembered seeing them recently. No one had.

She went to her own motel shortly after, checking into her room and almost immediately going to bed. She had two appointments tomorrow, one with a detective here and the other with the police chief from the second town a body had been found in. She was lucky either of them had made time to talk to her, given that tomorrow was a Saturday. Her plans were to speak to them in the morning and then visit other relevant sites, before visiting as many surrounding hotels and gas stations as possible.

Even though she wasn't actually investigating the case itself (but rather, something that might be related to it, as she had been upfront in explaining), she was interested in the perspectives of the people who had worked it firsthand. Clarice didn't expect to solve the case of the dismembered girls, but she was looking for someone who potentially had. She still felt her best bet was the chance that someone had seen Will in the area, but she had come all this way to get a firsthand view of things, so she intended to do that as well.

The talk with the detective didn't inform Clarice of anything that she hadn't already known, but she graciously thanked him for his time.

Next she met Chief Jenkins, a genial man nearing retirement. The murders were clearly the worst thing that had ever happened in all the years he had worked.

"When we got the 911 call that an arm had been found by a dog walker, we knew what we were in for," he said. "We sent out every cruiser right then, hoping to catch him in the act. That was about just after six in the morning, but he was long gone. Ferris and Brady found two more pieces of that poor girl while patrolling, and the other three were discovered by citizens pretty quick."

Clarice nodded. Everyone that had discovered a piece of one of the girls had been thoroughly interviewed and none of them had been suspected of being involved. Though before she had made the trip, Clarice had taken the time to ascertain that they were all still living. It had occurred to her that if anyone even peripherally involved in the case had been killed, it had the potential to be a very solid lead on Will.

"The town was on eggshells after that," he continued. "Makes people afraid to step out of their front doors. And I'm sure you know the kinds of calls you get after something like that. Everyone's Aunt Mabel has a theory on who done it."

"I've read all the reports. From what I understand, there were never any serious suspects, not considered by you or by the FBI."

"That's right. Now, they investigated the murder of Mary Andrews—the first girl—pretty differently, but after Erica Jones was killed and your people declared it a serial murder, it was a whole other ballgame. We did investigations on everyone that knew Erica, but they all checked out. There was no connection between any of the girls. As far as we could tell, he was just killing them to be killing them, God help them. Folks are getting antsy again, though, expecting another body any day now."

Clarice nodded again. “What do you personally make of the theory that it was a drifter, just someone passing through the area?”

Jenkins spread his hands. “It’s a nice thing to think, makes people sleep a little easier. We do get a lot of people passing through the area, and as far as the timing goes, the girls were killed during some our nicer months, before the real cold sets in, and that’s when there’s more seasonal traffic. Have you talked to Charlie Benton?”

“No,” Clarice said, though the name rang a bell. “He was a park ranger?”

Jenkins nodded. “Still is. He was never on the force, but we all know each other around here. He and a couple of the rangers kept an eye out for anything suspicious around the parks when the worst of it was going on. You might talk to him or one of the other boys if they’re around.”

Clarice found Benton’s address and phone number listed in one of the case files. She called the number, but it obviously wasn’t current, as it had been disconnected. She decided to drive to the address on the off chance that he was home and she could speak to him. If he wasn’t, she intended to leave a note with her contact information.

She doubted that Dr. Lecter or Will had frequented a national park, but if they had been searching for a killer who did, it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility.

Benton’s address was out of her way, but it would take her an hour, tops. Then she could resume hunting for evidence of Will ever being here until it was time for her to start her drive back. It was just past eleven, and Clarice grabbed a quick sandwich for lunch in town before heading out.

Her GPS led her north out of town, and soon she was on a forested county road with intermittent driveways. The houses that she could see were small, and few and far between. It was several miles more before she reached her destination. The driveway was long and at the end of it sat a small wooden cabin that had clearly been built in decades past as a hunting cabin or a weekend home.

But there was a truck parked in front of it, and Clarice was gratified that she hadn’t driven out here for nothing. After parking next to the truck, she got out and made her way up the steps to the front door.

She was reaching to knock when a pained, primal scream erupted from within the cabin.

Her instincts kicked into overdrive, her hand automatically going for her gun. Clarice didn’t second guess herself about anything else a scream like that could have meant. She was tracking serial killers, and someone was being murdered.

The phrases ‘exigent circumstance’ and ‘imminent danger’ flashed through her mind like lightning, and she quickly assessed the door. It was old, weathered wood, and the lock was not a deadbolt.

Putting all her weight into it, Clarice delivered a well-aimed kick just below the doorknob, and then another. On her second try, the door swung inward, and she stepped in with her gun raised. “FBI! Freeze!”

There were two men in the room—one swung around at her dramatic entrance, the other was hanging from a hook in the ceiling. His arms were suspended from ropes, his toes barely touching the floor. He was bruised and bloody, and he was turned so that she had a clear view of his left side, where new blood was flowing from a deep wound.

The man who stood behind him was holding a red-stained knife, blood still dripping from it. He was average in every way—average height, average weight, somewhere in his forties. Clarice cataloged all that she saw in less than a second, pointing her gun at the man on his feet.

“Drop it!” she yelled. “Now!”

He moved, his clear intention to stab the other man again, and Clarice shot him in the shoulder. The knife went flying, and he went down with the impact of the bullet, rolling onto his stomach.

“Stay down!” Clarice commanded.

The man made an attempt at movement, reaching, and the prisoner rasped, “He’s got a gun.”

Clarice fired again, and the man went still, dead.

She rapidly took stock of the rest of her surroundings. The cabin had one front room with a fireplace, a galley kitchen on one side, and two doorways. Clarice swiftly checked both of them for further threats, finding nothing but an empty bedroom and a bathroom.

She then returned to the tied up man, holstering her gun and grabbing the first knife in the kitchen that she saw to cut him down. All of his weight seemed to hang from the ropes, his muscles taut and exhausted, his head bowed.

“Sir? My name is Clarice Starling. I’m with the FBI. You’re safe now.” Clarice sliced one rope and then the other, and the man swayed uncertainly for a moment before he fell to his hands and knees, breathing heavily. She knelt next to him, pulling out her phone. “I’m going to get you help. Just hold on.”

Before she could dial, he snatched the phone from her and tossed it behind him, his other hand removing her gun from her holster in one smooth, speedy movement as he stood. Clarice jumped to her feet and found herself staring down the barrel of her own gun.

It took her a moment to even recognize the man behind it.

Will Graham.

Even facing him head on, she almost did a double take, and couldn’t blame herself for not identifying him in the heat of the moment or its aftermath. His hair was halfway in his face, damp with perspiration and blood, and his features were muddied with dried blood from

wounds that had freely flowed. He was shirtless, his torso a patchwork of cuts and color; his pants were slashed and stained crimson.

She had come here looking for Will Graham, but she had never truly expected to find him, least of all like this. Her head was spinning, desperately trying to process the situation. Surely the man she had just shot was Benton, but she had missed something horribly. She'd been right, she'd been wrong—but she didn't have time at the moment to figure out how the two collided. She needed to deal with the circumstances she was in now.

Will was watching her with a steady gaze. He was in bad shape, but he wasn't nearly as wobbly as he had apparently pretended to be when she'd first cut him down. The hand that was now holding her gun was anything but shaky.

"Handcuff yourself to the sink, Clarice," Will said, his voice rough. He gestured with a nod of his head to the door behind her.

Clarice remained unmoving, unwilling to immediately do anything that would put her at an additional disadvantage. The moment was tense, but every second that passed gave her further confidence. If he'd intended to kill her, he would have fired the second he'd gotten his hands on her gun.

She looked at Will, her gaze just as firm as his. "You're not going to kill me."

"No," Will agreed, his admission sounding anything but encouraging. "But I will shoot you." He adjusted his arm so that the gun was pointed at her shoulder instead of her head. "And then I'll restrain you myself."

The tone of the moment had shifted, and not in her favor. Clarice hesitated, even though she knew her options were limited. Will was in no condition otherwise to prevent her from doing anything, but she had no doubt that his aim was excellent.

"I'm not going back to prison," Will said. He cocked the gun, his eyes dark. "If I have to choose between me and you, I'm not going to choose you."

Part of Clarice already knew what she was going to do, even though she hated it. She saw no good alternative besides fighting him and getting shot, and she didn't particularly feel like getting shot.

Clarice exhaled in defeat. "Fine," she said, nodding. "All right."

In other circumstances, she might have taken her chances, done anything before she let herself be rendered immobile and vulnerable. But she had some experience with Will Graham; he simply wanted her out of the way.

Will gestured with the gun, a sharp, quick movement. "Take off your holster," he said. "And your jacket."

Clarice did so, removing her belt and dropping it to the ground, before taking off her jacket. Then she took her handcuffs and backed into the tiny bathroom.

Will kept the gun trained on her the whole time. “Both hands,” he said.

She crouched and secured one cuff to her hand, and then reached around the pipe under the old porcelain sink before cuffing her other wrist. Will stepped into the bathroom and pulled the cord for the light, then moved to her and gave the cuffs a firm tug. Satisfied, he tucked the gun into the back of his pants.

“I’m going to check your pockets,” Will said.

Clarice nodded.

He dropped to one knee, checking her pockets with the ease of someone who was used to doing it. She tried not to wonder whether he was falling back into police procedure, or whether it was something he regularly checked before tying people up. She also tried not to think about the blood he was probably getting on her clothes.

“Where are your keys?” he asked. “In your jacket?”

“Yes, in the pocket.”

But after processing his question, Clarice had a moment of sheer panic. “You can’t just leave me here,” she gasped, looking up at him. “Please. No one knows where I am—no one will even be looking for me.” No one would find her if he took her phone, and if she couldn’t figure out a way get loose by herself— “*Please* don’t leave me like this.”

Will stared at her a long moment, his brow furrowing as he considered her. She had no idea what he was thinking, though it was clear that he hadn’t expected her reaction. Will’s stare went vacant, and Clarice wondered if he was reading her like he would read a crime scene. Finally, he said, “It would be… inadvisable for me to drive anywhere right now. If it’s unnecessary, things are simpler. I’m also going to need your shoes,” he added.

Clarice dropped her eyes to the floor as she sat all the way down; she was unbearably relieved that he wasn’t simply leaving, and slightly ashamed of that relief. Will removed her shoes without comment and felt under the hem of her pants to check for anything strapped to her ankle.

Then he stood, moving to rummage in the mirrored cabinet above the sink, looking for anything that was potentially within her reach. After that, he stepped back and regarded her from the doorframe.

He really did look horrible. She wouldn’t be surprised if every bit of his energy was being used merely to stay upright. And yet he had gone to a considerable amount of trouble to make sure she stayed restrained, when it would have been much easier for him to have shot her.

“You need a hospital,” Clarice said.

“I have a doctor,” he said, his voice flat but amused.

Clarice could hardly pass up an opening like that. “Where is Dr. Lecter?” She had assumed they were still together, but after finding Will like this, she suddenly wasn’t certain.

“Looking for what he lost, I imagine.”

Clarice realized he was referring to himself. But something in his tone indicated that he hadn’t been lost by choice. “Then I imagine you want to be found,” she ventured.

Will smirked. “I imagine so.”

After another moment of silence, Clarice asked, “What happened to you?”

“I had an admirer.”

It took Clarice a moment to realize that he was talking about Benton. She raised an eyebrow. “Your admirer wanted to kill you?”

One corner of his mouth turned up in a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.”

With that, he turned and left her there. She saw him moving about the room outside, picking up her discarded things and going through them. Clarice heard the faint jangle of keys. He had both her gun and her car keys, then. When Will next crossed her line of vision, he closed the door as he passed.

Will’s footsteps around the cabin grew unsteady, and once she heard him stumble. She honestly hoped, for her own sake, that he didn’t pass out and give himself a concussion. The sound of movements continued for a few more minutes, and only when she heard the low sound of his voice did she realize that he must have been looking for Benton’s phone, because he certainly wasn’t stupid enough to use hers. She had the pointless thought Benton must have gotten another phone after his previous number had been disconnected.

The conversation was short and abrupt, and while Will talked softly enough that she couldn’t make any of it out, there was no question of who he had called.

A moment later, his footsteps neared the bathroom door again, before continuing for a few more paces and stopping. She heard the audible creak of old springs as he collapsed on the bed.

Raising her voice, she asked, “Is he coming?”

In the silence afterward, Clarice thought that he had passed out, or simply wasn’t going to answer for whatever reason.

But Will finally spoke.

“Yes.”

Chapter 3

The hours that followed were uneventful and uncomfortable. The bathroom floor was hard and cold, and remained such, no matter how often Clarice tried to shift position. The bathroom itself was tiny, the cabinet over the old sink being the only fixture in the room. The toilet was right next to the sink, and a small shower took up the rest of the space.

Will had obviously fallen asleep or passed out some time ago. If he was awake again, he had given no indication of it, and the cabin had been completely silent. Clarice had tried several times to figure out exactly how what had happened here connected to everything else, but she hadn't been able to concentrate, frustration at her own situation getting the better of her.

Clarice had explored the bathroom early on, standing up as far as she could and seeing if there was anything useful in the cabinet, which she managed to open with her nose. There had been nothing that might help her pick the handcuffs. The toilet was right next to her, which was maddening, because she knew the tank would contain a chain with a hook. But even if she could kick off the tank lid, there would be no way she could reach inside, let alone unhook the chain. There wasn't even a toilet paper holder, which would have had a spring; instead the roll simply sat on the back of the tank. She wished she had been wearing earrings, but suspected that even if she had been, Will wouldn't have overlooked them. Clarice had also stared entirely too long at the pipes under the sink, even though she knew they were so tight and fixed that she would be unlikely to get them off even if she had the proper tools. She had briefly considered screaming, but had concluded that it would only get her gagged.

It might have seemed strange, but Clarice wasn't particularly afraid for herself. She didn't feel any desperate need to escape out of fear or panic. Granted, she hadn't quite figured Dr. Lecter into the equation when she'd handcuffed herself, and she knew it was arrogance to assume anything where he was concerned, but her gut feeling said that he wouldn't harm her anymore than he had last time.

She still felt she had made the strategic decision in not provoking Will when she was disarmed and he was desperate. At any rate, she would much rather be handcuffed and waiting for Dr. Lecter, than to have been shot and be relying on Dr. Lecter's whims to provide medical assistance. Clarice didn't doubt that he was an excellent surgeon, but that was a position she was quite happy never to be in.

The main reason she wanted to escape was simply so she could alert the FBI. She had come here looking for Will Graham, and she had found him, in a completely different way than she had anticipated. It was difficult to be so close and unable to do anything about it.

The day wore on as the hours passed, and eventually, she heard the low hum of a car. In the stillness it seemed deafening.

Clarice pulled herself to attention, straining her ears for anything that followed.

The car engine was cut, but there was no sound of a door closing or of footsteps outside. The next sound she heard was the cabin door swinging open, its old hinges not completely quiet.

For a moment, there was nothing.

Then Will's voice cut through the silence. "Hannibal. In here."

His tone itself must have told Dr. Lecter something, because the footsteps that crossed the old wooden floor were not cautious or silent.

The door was thin, and Clarice could hear without even trying.

Dr Lecter's steps stopped just past her. "Will."

"It looks worse than it is," Will said hoarsely.

"Is that your medical opinion?" Dr. Lecter's tone was derisive, but warm.

"My informed opinion."

"Perhaps you are right. You made work of him, at any rate."

"Indirectly."

"Cunning as always," Dr. Lecter said. "You will have to tell me everything that occurred since we were so rudely parted yesterday. But now I really must examine you."

"There's something else," Will said. "There's a surprise tied up in the bathroom."

A chuckle from Dr. Lecter. "A guest for dinner?"

"Not exactly."

Clarice didn't particularly appreciate being referred to as a surprise, though evidently Will hadn't yet told Dr. Lecter of her being here. There was dry humor in Will's voice, and Clarice was struck with the impression that he had neglected to mention her because it amused him to do so.

"You keep me in suspense, Will," Dr. Lecter said, a smile still in his voice.

"And I've given you the means of relieving it."

"You have indeed."

There were footsteps then, and Clarice realized Dr. Lecter was seconds away from opening the bathroom door. Her heart sped up. Despite the confidence she had in the chances of her well-being, she knew that anything—absolutely anything—could happen when he opened the door.

The knob turned, and the door opened.

Dr. Lecter's face was fixed in a blank look of expectation, but when he saw her, his eyes widened and his mouth fell slightly open. On him, it was an expression of complete shock.

“Clarice,” he said, sounding no less astounded.

She heard an amused noise from Will, something between a snicker and a wheeze.

Dr. Lecter’s eyes tracked in Will’s direction, a pleased look flickering over his face, before they landed on her again. “I must admit, this *is* a surprise.”

“For all of us, Dr. Lecter,” she said. It would be impolite not to reply in some way.

His mouth twitched in a smile that didn’t quite form, and she saw him quickly put together the pieces—her presence, the extra car outside, and the shooting of the man who had held Will.

Then he crouched down in front of her, his head tilting a bit as he caught her gaze. “Tell me, Clarice, who knows you’re here?”

In most cases, the best answer would be that any number of people knew exactly where she was, even if it was a lie. But that would be the worst possible answer here; this was only going to go well if she wasn’t a threat. Not to mention that she had already told Will that there was no one coming, and changing her story wasn’t going to lead to any goodwill in her direction.

“No one,” she said.

Dr. Lecter’s eyes narrowed slightly, his expression reproachful. “I find that difficult to believe.”

“It’s the truth. I didn’t tell anyone where I was going. It was stupid, and clearly I should have,” she said, rattling the handcuffs for emphasis. “I was here looking for information. I never expected to find what I did.”

“What did you expect to find?”

Clarice figured it was better to admit the truth; it was the only plausible reason that she would be investigating serial murders on her own. “I thought there might be a lead, one that could eventually lead me to you and Will.”

There was a spark of interest in his eyes. “Has Jack assigned you to me?”

“No,” Clarice said, nearly smiling in spite of herself. Crawford had kept her as far away from Dr. Lecter’s case as possible. “But I’ve been keeping tabs on unsolved cases on my own. I looked for patterns; I thought maybe I’d found one. I didn’t tell anyone because I didn’t want to put anyone in your path.”

“Yet you put yourself here.”

“Because of personal interest. But I couldn’t live with being directly responsible for the death of anyone I care about. If I were investigating you officially, and I had a lead, that would be different, but I’m not going to push my agenda onto others.” Clarice paused, and then said more quietly, “I’m not going to become Jack Crawford. And that’s why I’m here by myself.”

A slow smile spread across Dr. Lecter's face. "In that case, I'm flattered to be of personal interest."

Clarice studied him, frowning slightly at the fact that he didn't seem to hold it against her. "You don't care that I'm trying to catch you?"

"I would expect nothing less." Then Dr. Lecter stood, taking a step out of the bathroom. He glanced away from her and asked, "Any opinions?"

"She's telling the truth," Will said.

"I concur."

Will didn't explain his thoughts, and Dr. Lecter didn't ask for his reasoning. He simply accepted Will's insight at face value.

"I'll get my bag," Dr. Lecter said to Will. "Since we are not expecting any company, it will be as convenient to attend to you here." Then he looked back at her. "You will excuse me."

With that, he quietly closed the door on her.

For close to two hours, Clarice was left by herself. How much time exactly passed, she couldn't say. She could only assume that Dr. Lecter was taking all the time he wanted to clean and stitch Will's wounds. He never came into the bathroom, but she heard the tap in the kitchen, and he undoubtedly carried medical supplies superior to anything that would be found in the medicine cabinet above her head.

Several times, she heard the two of them speaking, but their voices were pitched low enough that she couldn't make out the words.

Clarice wondered where this situation was ultimately going. The longer she sat, the more uncertainty began to churn in her gut. It was extremely disconcerting knowing that Dr. Lecter was in the next room without knowing exactly what he was up to, even though all logic said he was tending to Will. And while she hadn't been particularly worried while waiting for him to arrive, the abstract idea of him was completely different from the reality.

The last time she'd been in this position, events had unfolded fairly quickly. She had woken up in a motel room and had been informed almost immediately that they were going to finish a conversation. Now, she had no idea what to expect. And while Dr. Lecter had seemed somewhat pleased to see her, it began to occur to her that he might not be in the best of moods, given what had happened to Will.

That alone made this a marked difference from their last encounter, when he had been positively thrilled with circumstances in general.

While Clarice still ultimately felt that he wasn't going to kill her, the longer she was left alone, the more uneasy she became.

When the knob of the bathroom door finally turned, Clarice was immediately at attention, hoping she didn't look as startled as she felt.

Dr. Lecter took a step into the room before once again crouching in front of her. He regarded her with a look that was nearly expressionless.

“Will is resting comfortably,” Dr. Lecter said.

“That’s good,” Clarice commented, neutral.

She really looked at him for the first time, registering the differences the years had made. He was a bit leaner, perhaps, but was still in excellent physical shape, with the form of a man who had done strenuous activity all his life. There were a few more lines on his face, but not enough to truly age him. The largest difference was his hair, which was nearly half silver.

His eyes were exactly the same. Whether they were flat and closed off, or glittering with genuine amusement, they were always so, so black.

“Your presence is something of an inconvenience, Clarice,” he said. “Will needs to recuperate. Ideally, my preference would be to simply find a room somewhere nearby, to anonymously remain in one place as long as was needed. But that will hardly be possible with you ready to put the FBI on our trail.”

Clarice swallowed. “I imagine you’re rarely troubled by inconveniences for long.”

Dr. Lecter’s lips quirked at her indirect yet blunt assessment of the situation. “I have another scenario in mind. If necessary, I could leave with Will now, though I would prefer not to. But even convalescing overnight would be beneficial for him. Then we could depart the area more easily.”

Clarice wasn’t entirely sure what he was getting at. “And how do I figure into this scenario, Dr. Lecter?” It was entirely clear how she figured into a scenario where Dr. Lecter and Will stayed in the area for any amount of time.

“We will remain here and take our leave of you tomorrow. Will may rest to prepare for traveling, and you and I may have another conversation.” A pleased look settled over his face. “A compromise that suits all our purposes.”

If her purposes were ‘living,’ then yes, that suited her purposes.

“And when you do take your leave?” she asked, arching a brow. “Won’t I be just as inconvenient then?”

He looked amused. “I’m sure something can be arranged to give myself and Will the necessary time to depart.”

That meant he was probably going to drug her again. By the time she was able to alert the authorities, Dr. Lecter and Will would be long gone.

But given the situation she was in and who she was dealing with, any scenario that didn’t end with her getting her neck snapped would be considered a positive outcome by most.

It took Clarice another beat to fully process the fact that if Dr. Lecter wasn't killing her and he wasn't leaving until tomorrow, then she wasn't leaving until tomorrow, either. She was stuck here. She was effectively his prisoner.

Clarice had known when she'd handcuffed herself that she was giving up control, but the actuality of it still hit her in an unpleasant way.

She bit back a sigh. "Then I suppose, Dr. Lecter, I'm at your disposal."

A smirk appeared on his face. "You are indeed." He moved his hand, and she saw the keys to the handcuffs between his fingers. "But for now, a slight change of scenery."

Clarice managed not to flinch when he touched her wrist, his movements precise and mechanical as he unlocked the cuffs. When he was done, he stood and stepped back. Clarice got to her feet, trying not to visibly shake out the soreness from sitting so long.

She resisted the urge to ask where she was going, as she knew it couldn't be far. Instead, she asked, "May I use the restroom?"

"Certainly," he said with a nod.

Dr. Lecter moved out of the room in one fluid motion, closing the door behind him.

Clarice took a moment to gather herself.

But she actually did need to use the restroom, and she wasn't sure when she would have the opportunity to do so again. After she was done, her eyes lingered on the toilet tank as she flushed, thinking again that there might be something inside that could help her pick the handcuffs the next time she was restrained.

Clarice shook her head, moving to the sink to wash her hands. Now wasn't the time, for several reasons. The dynamic had shifted, and getting out of the cuffs themselves would only get her so far.

She dried her wet hands as well as she could on her jeans, as she certainly wasn't going to use the sole grimy towel hanging over the shower door. When she opened the bathroom door, Dr. Lecter was standing there as expected. He gestured for her to precede him into the back room.

The room contained an old metal-frame bed, which itself contained Will.

"Please, sit," Dr. Lecter said.

Not particularly seeing another option, Clarice sat.

Dr. Lecter fastened one cuff to the frame of the bed and the other to her wrist.

"I have some things to attend to," he said, moving back to the doorframe. "After which we may have our conversation."

Clarice looked at the sleeping Will before glancing back at Dr. Lecter, her brow furrowing. "You're leaving me alone with him?"

Dr. Lecter tilted his head slightly. "Would you rather be alone with me?" he asked, his expression perfectly placid.

There was no right answer to that question. 'No' was certainly not the right answer, and 'yes' would be a lie.

"I'm surprised, that's all," she said. She was law enforcement, and Will was who she was trying to catch.

Dr. Lecter smiled at her evasion of the verbal trap he had set. Then he simply said, "You are too moral a person, Clarice, to harm an injured man simply to get at me."

With that, he stepped out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

Clarice exhaled, long and slow. The words were true enough. She couldn't kill anyone in cold blood, and she couldn't torture anyone. What was she going to do—threaten to hurt Will unless Dr. Lecter let her go? *Actually* hurting him would be sealing her own fate.

Her eyes flitted to Will. He wasn't in the middle of the bed, but wasn't quite on one side of it, either. Will was tucked halfway beneath the quilt, and he was wearing a clean white undershirt. Clarice could see bandages beneath it, the extra layer of white a small contrast to his skin, even through the shirt's material. But white was all she saw; he hadn't bled through any of the visible bandages. His face was bruised, with a black eye and one side of his jaw swollen, and there were several fine cuts that had been sealed with medical glue.

But he was clean, with most of the blood sponged off his skin except what lingered around his hairline. He was also utterly still. If it weren't for the slow rise and fall of his chest, he was so quiet she wouldn't have even known he was breathing. Clarice suspected Will was resting comfortably because Will wasn't entirely conscious. Then again, if she were in the shape Will was, she wouldn't want to be entirely conscious, either.

Clarice stood, mainly for something to do, and took in her new surroundings. The room was tiny, probably eight by eight feet. The bed took up the majority of it; on the side of the room opposite the door and furthest from her was a small dresser. The room didn't even have a lamp; instead, there was a single low wattage bulb in a bare ceiling fixture. There was no window. Undoubtedly the bedroom had been built without a window to conserve heat in the dead of winter. It wasn't up to today's fire codes, but more relevant to her situation was the fact that there was only one exit.

The bed she was cuffed to was old and heavy, with a metal frame of thick bars. It looked similar to something that might have been seen in a hospital almost a century ago. She wasn't getting free from it any more than she had been from the sink.

Clarice sighed and moved to sit down again. She propped a pillow up against the uncomfortable headboard, and then sat on the bed, leaning against the pillow and stretching

her feet out in front of her. Her left wrist was cuffed, and she was on the left side of the bed, so she was able to rest fairly comfortably.

She briefly wondered why Dr. Lecter had moved her at all, why he hadn't simply left her in the bathroom. After considering it, she concluded that it wasn't out of any consideration for her, but for his own practicalities. He would eventually want to use the restroom himself, or would want to take Will to it, and he would consider it vulgar to have her tied up there.

There weren't any sounds from beyond the closed door to suggest what Dr. Lecter might be doing, though Clarice suspected all the same. He was a cannibal and there was a dead body—it wasn't hard to put together the pieces.

Clarice closed her eyes for a long moment. When she opened them, she stared blankly at the wooden wall ahead of her, taking stock of her situation.

Even if she managed to get free of the handcuffs, circumstances had changed drastically from when Will had restrained her.

Dr. Lecter was now between her and the only exit, and unlike Will, he wasn't impaired in any way. Clarice knew she couldn't win against him in any sort of physical confrontation. She took a fair amount of pride in her physical skills, but she also knew her own limitations. Even if she could make it past him to the front door, she would still be on foot, without shoes, and she didn't have much doubt that he was faster than she was.

While Clarice willingly risked her life every day in the line of duty, escaping and alerting law enforcement was no longer realistic. She could struggle against being captive all she wanted, and it likely wouldn't do anything to further her getting away. If nothing she did here would lead to Dr. Lecter's arrest, a different question presented itself: was being difficult on principle worth getting on the bad side of a psychopath?

Clarice had strong ideals, but ultimately, she felt the answer was 'no.'

Dr. Lecter liked her in some capacity and currently didn't see a reason to hurt her. She would be a fool to be disagreeable enough to give him one. There was no point in performing small acts of rebellion or in being verbally resentful.

The best course of action was to do as she had been doing. If a chance of legitimate escape arose, she would of course take it. Otherwise, she would play his game.

She had played it before. And while she hadn't won, she certainly hadn't lost.

Chapter 4

It was hard to keep track of time. She had no watch and no phone, and after about an hour, her internal sense of timekeeping began to falter.

Somewhere around two hours after she had last seen Dr. Lecter, Clarice smelled the unmistakable scent of meat cooking. She tried very hard not to think about what that meant, but mostly didn't succeed. Sometime an hour or so after that, the bedroom door opened.

Dr. Lecter stepped in and unlocked the handcuffs without comment.

Clarice sat up properly, bringing her feet to the floor and perching on the edge of the bed. She looked up at him.

Dr. Lecter was standing in the open doorway. "I'd like you to join me for dinner," he said.

She had suspected this was coming. Will hadn't stirred once, and certainly wouldn't be eating any time soon, which meant that any meal Dr. Lecter was preparing wasn't going to be had by him. But even though she had expected it, that didn't mean she was any more prepared for the actual moment and whatever her refusal was going to bring.

Despite her strategy of being agreeable, Clarice found herself incapable of not fighting him on this. It was a line she wouldn't cross.

"Thank you, but I'd prefer not to," she said.

Dr. Lecter's face was unreadable, and for a beat he didn't speak. "And I would prefer you join me."

Clarice steeled herself, squaring her jaw and staring up at him. "I won't." The '*You can't make me*,' hovered just behind her lips, unsaid.

She knew he very well could make her, though that had never seemed to be his chosen method. But she resolved that unless he force fed her, she wasn't going to eat anything he had cooked.

Clarice only held his gaze a moment more, dropping her eyes to the floor after that. It was bad enough that she was refusing; she didn't need to further challenge him with a direct stare.

Dr. Lecter let silence fill the room, and it was just as uncomfortable as anything he might have said. She felt trapped, but didn't waver in her decision.

"I won't," she repeated quietly, looking at his feet. "I'm not eating anything."

After another moment, he simply said, "Very well. But you must at least join me at the table."

"Why?" Clarice hated how small her voice sounded.

“So I may have the pleasure of your company,” he said, making it sound like a perfectly reasonable invitation.

When she glanced up, he looked darkly amused. Clarice didn’t have time to examine that too closely, because Dr. Lecter also had a hand extended toward her, a sign that he expected her to comply.

Steeling herself once again, Clarice took the offered hand as she stood, but let go once she was on her feet. As she moved past him through the doorway, she felt his fingers brush the small of her back. They remained there as he guided her toward the table.

It was as much a gesture of ingrained courtesy as it was a reminder that he was right behind her. For a few steps, there was nothing between her and the front door, but she was less than an arm’s reach away from him.

Once at the table, Dr. Lecter stepped to the side, pulling out a chair for her. He pushed it under her with perfect timing as she sat, and then moved to the opposite side of the table, where he stood to uncork the wine.

Clarice generally disliked men assisting her because she was a woman; it was a set of manners that simply rubbed her the wrong way. But Dr. Lecter’s adherence to extreme politeness was part of his pathology, and had little to do with her. He was engaging in the role of host, and all formalities flowed accordingly. She also suspected he would have escorted Will Graham into a dining room in much the same way.

Abruptly, Clarice realized there was only one real place setting, and it was in front of Dr. Lecter’s seat. Her eyes flicked from his plate and cutlery to the empty space in front of her.

Dr. Lecter saw her looking. He actually winked at her.

He reached over the table to pour a serving of wine into her glass, before pouring his own wine and taking his seat. She realized he had never intended for her to have a meal. He had simply been curious to see what she would do.

“You surprise me, Dr. Lecter.”

“No reason to waste good food.” A genuinely amused smile settled on his lips. “And I would hate to be considered predictable.”

Perhaps he knew that no one would commit cannibalism unless forced. Or maybe the appeal of serving his cooking to people had lain in their obliviousness. But it was not a question she was going to pursue further. She was a profiler, but she had no illusions of understanding him. Even if you could understand every separate piece of him, there was no understanding how those pieces moved in conjunction with each other.

Clarice allowed herself an arch smile in return. “I don’t think being predictable will ever be a charge laid at your door, Doctor.”

Dr. Lecter raised his glass. “To unpredictability. And surprising encounters.”

Clarice nodded in turn, raising her glass and bringing it to his. She took a drink of wine out of politeness as he did, before setting the glass once again on the table. It wasn't wise drinking on an empty stomach, but if she only took a sip here and there and drank plenty of water in between, she should be fine.

She noted that although Dr. Lecter wasn't serving her human flesh, he wasn't serving her anything else, either. That was fine. She could survive without food until tomorrow. It wouldn't be enjoyable, but it was doable.

There was a glass of water and a glass of wine in front of her. Dr. Lecter had the same, plus a place setting with what were obviously dishes from the cabin—a heavy stoneware plate with a plain blue border, a fork and knife, and a paper napkin. In the middle of the table was a covered casserole dish that had seen better days, having several chips along its edge.

Dr. Lecter lifted the lid to the dish, revealing something that might have been a liver or a kidney—God, she didn't want to know—cooked with vegetables. He served himself, putting a helping on his plate, before once again covering the dish to keep it warm.

The table itself was small, with room for only two chairs, and both the table and Dr. Lecter's chair were between her and the door. She had no intention of trying to run, but she couldn't stop her mind from cataloging the information nonetheless. The table sat near the kitchen area, and the other part of the room had a couch and a recliner, both pushed to the walls. She could see Will's blood staining the old wooden floor, directly underneath the hook. She could see a larger stain to the side, where Benton had died.

Clarice took another drink of wine, before mentally refraining as she set the glass an extra inch away.

"I'm surprised the wine is to your taste, Dr. Lecter," she said, opening the conversation. She didn't know much about wine, but she could tell from the bottle that it wasn't expensive.

"It is not what I would have chosen, but it was what I found on hand," Dr. Lecter said. He began to eat, cutting precisely one bite of meat with his knife. "We must make the best of what is available."

"Indeed," Clarice said, thinking of her own situation.

At that exact moment, Clarice wished more than anything he had just left her handcuffed to the sink. She would rather spend the night in an uncomfortable position on the cold, dirty floor than have to sit at the table and watch him eat the man she'd shot. At least the body was gone from the room. Years of observing autopsies had left her more or less indifferent to anything inside a body, but she might have actually thrown up if she could see the man Dr. Lecter's dinner had been pulled out of. He wasn't making her participate in this meal, but she was still an unwilling guest.

The handcuffs had not made an appearance at the table, which meant that either Dr. Lecter was confident in his ability to stop her if she tried to get away, or that he had already determined that she wouldn't try to get away. She wondered if it was defeatist or pragmatic that she had come to the same conclusion.

Clarice shifted her weight in her chair, figuring she might as well get as comfortable as possible. She started to lean forward, but thought better of it. He probably had actually killed people for putting their elbows on the table.

“Tell me,” he said after another moment, “how have you found the FBI?”

“It’s challenging work, but I enjoy it. I’ve never once thought of doing anything else.”

“Your career has been a positive one.” It wasn’t a question, but the tone of his voice was closer to an affirmation than a prompt for more information.

Clarice paused for a moment, considering her response. “Have you been keeping track of me, Doctor?” she asked, careful to keep her voice neutral as she reached for her water.

“I receive a notification if your name is mentioned in an article.” Another small smile crossed his lips, as he nodded his head almost in deference to her. “Nothing more invasive than that, I promise you.”

Clarice supposed she believed him, if for no other reason than that the Christmas cards always came care of the FBI, and not to her home address. It was easy enough to set an alert; at the touch of a button, a phrase could be tracked for any appearance in new content.

“I haven’t been mentioned that much,” Clarice said. She watched him take another bite, trying as hard as she could not to think about what he was eating.

“No,” Dr. Lecter agreed, “but on the occasions you have, it was always in conjunction with a successful resolution. Despite only having a career of a few years, you’ve distinguished yourself quite well.”

“I do my job because it’s fulfilling, and because I’m good at it. I was never doing it for recognition.”

“Recognition comes when lives are saved,” he said, holding her gaze. “Would you shy away from your accomplishments?”

“I don’t have a problem with recognition, or with the public aspects of my job. But I do it because I want to save lives, not because I want the credit of having saved them.”

“Perhaps that is why you are so easily distinguished.”

Dr. Lecter picked up his wine glass for another drink.

“I won’t be so distinguished after this,” she said after a moment. “I’ll be the agent who let Hannibal Lecter get away twice.”

“Or the agent that got away from me twice,” Dr. Lecter said, giving her a true smile. The expression completely changed his face, his eyes crinkling as he raised his glass slightly in her direction. “A much finer distinction.”

Clarice watched him as he took a drink and savored it. She had glimpsed enough of him to know that he savored everything—every experience, every encounter. And while he had wanted to see what she would do when faced with a dinner invitation, that was far from the reason he had made her join him. Dr. Lecter actually did want to talk to her and he truly was enjoying her company. None of this was an act; his pleasure at conversing with her was evident.

Clarice looked at him for a moment more across the table. Then she asked, "Why am I sitting here, Dr. Lecter?"

He took his time in replying, spearing the last bit of meat from his plate and bringing the fork to his lips. He watched her thoughtfully as he finished it. Then he said, "I told you once that I find the world more interesting with you in it. That is one reason."

"And the other?"

Dr. Lecter moved to pick up his glass again, slowly swirling the wine before he took a drink. "It's curious. Twice now our paths have crossed, and each time you have inadvertently reunited me with Will."

Clarice turned that statement over in her head. Finally, she said, "Are you saying I'm some sort of good luck?"

He smirked at that, his lips twisting slightly in amusement. "Merely that you have brought serendipity."

"I don't feel like serendipity." Clarice decided it was time for another drink of her own wine.

"What is serendipity to one can be catastrophe to another."

She arched a brow, setting the glass back down. "Are you my catastrophe, Doctor?"

"We're sharing a pleasant conversation. Hardly a catastrophe."

"Maybe I'm my own catastrophe," Clarice said after a pause. "I seem to have a talent for stumbling straight into the thick of things."

Dr. Lecter tilted his head. "As an FBI agent, you cannot be averse to danger."

"No, of course not. But on two separate occasions, I've been investigating what seemed like a dead end and walked in on a serial killer. Literally, in this case." Clarice took a drink of water. "I either have excellent or horrible luck."

"Are you including me in that luck?"

"It wasn't luck that produced our last encounter, Dr. Lecter." There had been no coincidence there; he had tracked her down in Belvedere. "Or this one, either." She hadn't lucked onto him; Will had called him. However, it was beyond sheer dumb luck that she had stumbled across Will, especially given that the original murders had been months ago. The chances of them both being here on the same day and crossing paths had to be astronomical.

“Then we are back to serendipity.” Dr. Lecter moved to serve himself again from the casserole dish. When he was done, he replaced the lid with a clinking of glass. Still glancing down and beginning to cut the meat on his plate, he said, “You realize it is entirely possible that you saved Will’s life.”

He took a bite, politely chewing while he waited for her reply. The casual tone of his voice belied the importance of the words. His eyes were fixed on her, and Clarice felt pinned in place.

“I suppose so,” she said carefully. She was unsure where this was going, while at the same time suddenly certain that it was going somewhere in her favor.

“One can never know what might have been, but it has occurred to me that I likely would have found a wholly different scenario had you not fortuitously interrupted what was happening here.”

He would have found Will dead, he meant. Clarice couldn’t stop herself from asking, “What would you have done?”

Dr. Lecter speared another piece of meat—Will’s torturer—holding it up in front of him and focusing on it as he answered. “Something I would have taken great pleasure in, but not something that would have returned that which would be forever lost.” He brought the bite to his mouth, then chewed and swallowed. “You’ve done me an invaluable service.”

“And what does that mean?” Clarice asked slowly.

“It means we part as friends,” Dr. Lecter said, meeting her gaze. “And perhaps I will someday have occasion to return the favor.”

It took her a second to work out that he meant returning the favor of saving Will’s life. Clarice pursed her lips. “I saved Will’s life, not yours, Doctor.”

“I fail to see the distinction,” he said easily. “Will’s life is as necessary as my own.”

Clarice took another drink of water. “Would you find yourself obligated to anyone who saved Will’s life?”

“Obligated, yes. Though the form that obligation might take would vary, depending on the situation.”

His tone was matter-of-fact, and it wasn’t hard to read between the lines. An obligation fulfilled would be a quick death if Dr. Lecter were inconvenienced or compromised by the other person, which he likely would be.

“To others, I would be obligated,” he continued. “To you, I am indebted.”

Clarice smiled, wry. “If you’re indebted to me, turn yourself in.”

Dr. Lecter smiled in turn, not bothered by her suggestion. “I offer a return of the favor, nothing more.”

Clarice nodded, not expecting anything different. “Thank you, but you’ll forgive me if I hope that opportunity doesn’t present itself.” The circumstances would be undesirable on all counts, not to mention improbable. “I doubt our paths will cross again.” Not unless he was under arrest, but she left that part unsaid.

“As did I last time we parted,” Dr. Lecter said easily. “Yet here we are.”

“Serendipity,” Clarice repeated, almost to herself.

She suddenly felt hollow.

Clarice was not one for self-loathing, but she never hated herself more than she did in that moment. She hated that she had been so engrossed in the conversation that she had been more interested in what he was about to say than she had been resentful of him keeping her here. She hated that a part of her still felt like she was simply going along with it, hated that she was passively sitting here without being tied up.

Clarice heard the sounds of Dr. Lecter’s silverware against his plate. It seemed simultaneously far away and all too near. The table was small, making their situation look laughably intimate. She imagined throwing her glass at his head and running for the door. She imagined him stopping her, with varying degrees of violence.

She imagined staying exactly where she was.

When she looked up, Dr. Lecter was watching her intently.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” he said.

Clarice took a deep breath, exhaling it slowly enough that it couldn’t quite be called a sigh. “I’m thinking I should be doing something.”

“‘Something’ is vague,” he commented. “What, specifically, do you believe you should be doing?”

“I shouldn’t be sitting here. I shouldn’t just accept this.”

“What alternative do you have?” His voice was impartial, as if this were a theoretical exercise and not a situation he had created.

“There is no alternative, no good one. It’s in my best interests to do what you want.”

Dr. Lecter refilled his wine glass. “How does that make you feel?”

“Like I’ve given up,” she said bluntly. “Like I haven’t done everything in my power to do my duty.”

“Where does obligation to duty end and obligation to your person begin? Or would the FBI demand you sacrifice yourself on its altar?”

“I risk my life every day. This isn’t any different.”

“Risk carries reward,” Dr. Lecter said, studying her. “Only by weighing the consequences of risk to the potential reward of that risk do we make decisions. Plight is what drives you, and you will always place ending that plight a reward greater than any risk.”

“I’m well aware there’s no one here for me to save.”

“Except yourself,” he said, a smirk playing about the corner of his mouth.

“Yes. Except myself.” She paused. “But my first obligation is to others, not myself. My duty is to arrest you.”

“And yet you have made no attempt to do so.”

“Thus creating my moral dilemma.” Clarice laughed quietly without feeling. “Perhaps that’s what I should specifically be doing.” She took another drink of wine.

She wondered what would happen if she simply stood up and announced he was under arrest, even though she had no gun, no handcuffs, and no power. He was too polite to laugh in her face, though she suspected amusement would play a strong role nonetheless.

“Or maybe I should run for the door,” she said. “If only to have the satisfaction of knowing that I tried.”

Dr. Lecter took another sip of wine. “If you feel the need to do so, then that is what you must do.”

He didn’t sound particularly discouraging or encouraging of such an action. Clarice realized he was going to enjoy whatever she chose to do. He would be just as entertained by stopping an escape attempt as he was by watching her battle her own principles.

“The scales of risk and reward are tipped too heavily in your favor,” Clarice said, shaking her head. “I’m not going to run. I’m not going to fight. I’m fixed in my decision, I’m doing what anyone would do—yet I can’t help feeling compromised.”

“You struggle with what you know to be the best course of action versus what an ideal version of yourself would be able to accomplish.”

Clarice swallowed. “Yes.”

“You struggle with having something you’ve pursued so close at hand, yet still beyond your reach.”

“Yes.”

Dr. Lecter tilted his head, considering her. “Would you kill me, in this moment, if you were able?”

Clarice met his stare. “My answer hasn’t changed since the last time you asked me that question. No, not without cause.”

“Putting your life or the lives of others in immediate danger,” he replied, repeating words from years ago to her.

“Yes,” she said. The silence hung between them, and Clarice slowly tilted her own head. “Am I in danger, Dr. Lecter?”

“No.” His eyes glittered in a peculiar way, and something dark and amused flitted through them. “Not without cause.”

There was the barest twitch at the corner of his mouth as he watched her.

“Touché, Doctor.” Clarice reached for her wine again.

That was the problem, of course. She wasn’t in danger as long as she did nothing, but there would be consequences to anything she did. It was a finely built game, one that he had constructed and left her to direct. The choice was hers, and yet there was no choice at all.

She’d known from the beginning that there was no way past Dr. Lecter, even if she had been inclined to try. But that hadn’t stopped her from questioning it, not while she was able to move and the door was in sight. The illusion of freedom was almost worse than the certainty of restraints.

“You’re holding me here against my will,” Clarice said. She had finished the wine, something she hadn’t intended to do. But it had seemed to be the only thing getting her through this conversation.

“A necessary measure,” Dr. Lecter said.

“By your perception.”

“Of course. We all serve our own perceptions.”

He moved to refill her glass, but Clarice waved him off with a murmured, “No, thank you,” before picking up her water and drinking the rest of it.

Then she said, “Most would perceive this as a dangerous situation. You are… generally considered to be an immediate danger by virtue of being present.”

Dr. Lecter smiled at that assessment. However, he said, “Perception is only pertinent to a single person; every situation will be perceived through the experiences and observations of the perceiver.” He regarded her evenly. “You would defend yourself against immediate danger without hesitation. Instead, we share a conversation.”

“That’s as much your doing as mine, Doctor.” Her lack of action had as much to do with her perception of the situation as it had to do with his lack of directly threatening behavior toward her person. “Am I sitting here because I saved Will, or because you wanted to have a conversation?”

“Both,” he said simply. “I would have desired a conversation with you under any circumstances. The circumstances under which we encountered each other simply made it all

the more appealing."

Dr. Lecter took another sip of wine. Then he loosely folded his napkin and discarded it next to his empty plate.

"Is our conversation over?" Clarice asked.

"For the time being."

She saw that he was wearing a watch. "What time is it?"

Dr. Lecter glanced at his wrist. "Nearly nine-thirty."

It was hard to believe only this morning she had grabbed a coffee for the road and set out before the sun was high. It seemed like another life.

"It's likely that Will needs my attention," he said.

Clarice couldn't think of a way to ask if that meant it was time for her to be tied up again that didn't sound indignant. However, Dr. Lecter took care of her dilemma when he simply stood and moved to her side, the picture of ease and grace.

He extended a hand in her direction, like this was all perfectly normal.

Clarice pressed her lips together and took it.

Chapter 5

Dr. Lecter left her handcuffed to the bed again.

However, he returned shortly with his bag. His sleeves were rolled up, and he walked around the room to Will's side.

Sitting on the edge of the bed next to Will, he opened the bag. Clarice watched as he checked Will's pupils with a penlight and then took his pulse. She was honestly surprised she was here for this. It seemed personal in a strange way, even though Dr. Lecter's demeanor was nothing but clinical.

He obviously wasn't troubled by her presence at all, and simply went about his business. If Will were awake, she suspected Dr. Lecter would have wanted privacy to talk, but he saw nothing objectionable about changing a few bandages with her in the room.

Clarice suddenly felt very tired—tired of her day, tired of her situation, and certainly tired of his company. Her initial anxiety was long gone, and she felt like she'd left the tension of their dinner conversation at the table. Now she just felt drained.

She watched vacantly as Dr. Lecter took out more supplies from his bag.

When he took out a vial and began to fill a needle, Clarice couldn't help asking, "What are you giving him?"

"What he asked me to," Dr. Lecter said, testing the needle. "Another dose will allow him to rest easily until morning." He injected it into Will's arm with a practiced hand.

Clarice swallowed. "And what are you going to give me tomorrow?"

"Nothing," he said, glancing at her. The corners of his mouth twisted up as he said, "Drug use should always be done under a doctor's supervision. Though on a more practical note, nothing I have would be sufficient at a single dose to allow us the time necessary to move beyond the purview of the FBI. When Will and I leave, you'll be restrained, nothing more."

She was grudgingly pleased that he wasn't going to drug her again, but it wasn't encouraging to hear that she was going to be left handcuffed. Clarice felt a small bubble of the overwhelming panic that had gripped her when she'd thought Will was leaving her alone and restrained. If Dr. Lecter was satisfied at leaving her conscious but confined, it meant he was confident she wouldn't be able to get free and alert anyone to their presence.

That begged the question of how she was to get free at all.

"How long do you expect me to be here?" Clarice asked, barely managing to choose the indirect route to what she really wanted to know, instead of simply blurting out her real question.

“When do you imagine you’ll be missed?” he countered.

Clarice didn’t have to imagine it; she had already considered it at length after Will had left her in the bathroom. “It might seem unusual that I don’t answer my phone by Sunday, but no one will worry until Monday morning when I don’t show up for work and don’t call in. By afternoon at latest, someone will realize something is wrong.”

Ardelia would realize something was wrong. She would check the apartment; she would go to Crawford.

“They will trace your phone,” Dr. Lecter said. “And they will find it. By the time emergency services are dispatched to this location, nearly a day will have passed. Will and I will be long gone.” He smiled to himself.

“Why didn’t I think of that,” she said dully. It was a simple solution. Will would have turned off her phone, but letting someone find her through it was as simple as turning it back on. Even if the phone wasn’t on, if someone traced it right now, it would show this place as her last location. It was due to her own horrible judgment that no one would be looking for her until Monday.

Dr. Lecter pulled back the quilt and sheet and began slowly un-taping the bandages on Will’s stomach. “You said no one knew where you were,” he said, his tone conversational, his focus on his work on Will. “Out of curiosity, what reason did you give for your absence?”

Clarice sighed, audibly. “I said I was taking a weekend to decompress. Just to clear my head and relax.”

“Is that something you routinely do?”

“Yes. Every three or four months.”

“Good,” Dr. Lecter said, sounding very much the medical professional. “Those in high stress careers who do not take such time for themselves tend to burn out swiftly and spectacularly. One cannot do any job without first achieving their own well-being.”

Clarice laughed. “And clearly my well-being is your utmost concern.”

“Just so,” Dr. Lecter said, looking genuinely amused.

Clarice belatedly realized what had slipped out of her mouth, her eyes widening.

If anything, Dr. Lecter looked even more amused, the curve of his mouth visible even as he returned his focus to Will.

The fact that she had laughed was what had caught her own attention, causing her to re-examine the words themselves. It was with impaired awareness that Clarice realized she was impaired. She knew she shouldn’t have drunk even a single glass of wine with nothing in her stomach, but plans had a way of going awry around Dr. Lecter. At least she hadn’t finished the glass until the end of their conversation; it was only now affecting her. Clarice had been

so careful with her words all evening; she had been frank, but had never said anything that could be interpreted as sarcastic or snide.

Until now, when she'd put her foot in it.

Yet he had taken it in good humor.

She slowly blinked as she processed the fact that she had just, in effect, teased Hannibal Lecter. For some reason, it seemed a liminal moment in her life, and she wasn't quite sure how she had arrived here. She didn't want to be here, literally or figuratively, but there was no changing that now.

Clarice watched, at what seemed like a great distance away, as Dr. Lecter replaced the gauze under Will's bandages, totally focused on his task. For a moment, she could imagine that she wasn't even here, that she was viewing the scene from afar in some impossible way. But she had only to move her cuffed hand slightly for a physical reminder of her presence here. She was present but separate, a participant in a conversation, and an observer of her own collision with the unclassifiable.

The summation of her day came in one succinct thought: she was alone in a cabin with two serial killers, and she was going to be just fine.

"This is surreal," she commented.

"Surreal implies a disconnect from reality." Dr. Lecter glanced at her, amusement still in his eyes. "Are you disconnecting from reality, Clarice?"

"I think reality is disconnecting from me. I don't feel like I've been in reality since I set foot here."

"We all create our own version of reality."

"You do, maybe," Clarice replied. "The rest of us just take it as it is."

"Then you are not getting out of life all that you could be."

"I get enough, I think." Clarice slumped against the pillow she'd propped up earlier, deciding she was past the point of appearing on her guard when it was clear that she was noticeably tipsy. "We can't all alter reality to our will."

Dr. Lecter smiled. "Is that what I do?" He began taping Will's bandages back in place. "I have never heard it described so. You have a particular understanding."

Clarice exhaled. "You're the second person to say that to me."

"Who was the first?"

"Another profiler." Even impaired, she wasn't going to say Ardelia's name.

"Did you profile me?" he asked with interest.

“I started to. But I didn’t get beyond a few scratches on paper. It seemed pointless. Everything that could possibly be said about you has been said. It’s even been said *by* you, in your refutation of Dr. Chilton’s book.”

Dr. Lecter nodded his head in acknowledgment. “Even so, we all have unique perspectives; yours would have reflected something inherent to your own experiences.”

Clarice stared past him. “My experiences with you are an anomaly.”

“Then they should contribute to a fascinating profile,” he said, one corner of his mouth turning up.

Clarice couldn’t think of a polite way to say that she had no desire to dissect those experiences publicly, that she didn’t want her name to become further associated with his in black and white. But she knew she needed to say something.

“The goal of a profile is understanding,” she said, her eyes drifting toward Will. “There’s only one person who understands you. I profiled him instead.”

When she glanced up, Dr. Lecter was watching her closely. “Will’s mind would be harder to understand than my own, I imagine.”

“I’m not talking about his mind, or how he does what he does. I’m talking about who he would choose to kill and why. I wanted a profile for practical purposes, not abstract ones.”

Dr. Lecter tilted his head. “And did you gain understanding?”

“I gained enough. My profile of Will is what led me here.”

“Did it indeed?” he asked. “I had wondered exactly how you came to be here, but it seems a more intriguing chain of events than I had imagined. We shall have to discuss it. Tomorrow, when Will can join us, and when we are all at our best.”

The last part was said with a peculiar humor, and Clarice knew he was referring to her. He seemed distinctly entertained that she was a little intoxicated.

She wondered if that had been his intention when he’d offered her wine but served her no food. Of course, his intention had also been to make the point that if she wasn’t eating his cooking, then she wasn’t eating at all, but he was more than capable of playing multiple games simultaneously. Though Clarice couldn’t claim that Dr. Lecter had pressured her to drink; she had done that all on her own.

The alcohol had certainly loosened her tongue. She was fortunate he liked her enough not to loosen it further.

Though given his general amusement, she began to suspect that Dr. Lecter was pleased to have gotten a few careless words out of her. If he had been hoping to see something other than her carefully strategic behavior, it was because he was curious, not because he was intending to hold whatever actions resulted against her. That wasn’t to say that Clarice believed she could do anything and not change his attitude toward her, just that a few

inebriated comments weren't going to be it, especially not if that's what he had been aiming for.

It struck her that Dr. Lecter had ended their conversation at the table right after she had refused a refill of her glass. She imagined nothing would have delighted him more than to have had the conversation they had, and then to continue with it after she was truly intoxicated. But he didn't show any dissatisfaction over the fact that things had proceeded differently.

She again realized that he was going to enjoy anything that happened. He would have enjoyed getting further inside her head while her defenses were down, but he enjoyed getting a peek just as much because it had led to entirely different conversation, as well as the expectation of an even more intriguing conversation tomorrow.

Clarice sighed. She was just tipsy enough not to have total control of what came out of her mouth, but still sober enough to analyze the motivations of a man most people couldn't begin to comprehend.

"Maybe I do have a particular understanding," she said dully.

Dr. Lecter smiled to himself.

He had finished with Will, and was now in the process of putting things back in his bag. Clarice watched as he rolled up the towel that held the discarded bloody gauze.

Her eyes drifted to Will, who looked as peaceful as ever. She couldn't help but remember how horrible he'd looked when she'd found him.

"How badly is he hurt?" she asked.

"His wounds are superficial but agonizing," Dr. Lecter said. "Designed to inflict pain without doing lasting damage in and of themselves, though they were getting progressively worse. The stab wounds avoided organs or arteries, although several of them are deep and would easily be prone to infection without the proper care. He was beaten, but besides a few cracked ribs there are no broken bones. None of these injuries would be incapacitating by themselves, but when taken together, they will produce a slow recovery." He tilted his head, looking down at Will. "Fortunately, our killer was taking his time with things."

Clarice generally couldn't describe anything like what had happened to Will as fortunate, but she recognized what Dr. Lecter meant. It was fortunate that Benton had a taste for the sadistic, instead of simply killing Will outright. "He was going to torture him to death," Clarice said. She paused, before asking, "How did he get him to begin with? What happened?"

"Perhaps we can include that in our conversation tomorrow." Dr. Lecter stood. He picked up his bag and moved to the door. Setting it outside the room, he stepped back in and asked, "Would you like to use the restroom?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He unlocked the handcuffs and allowed her to step into the bathroom.

The first thing that Clarice noticed after she shut the door was the fact that the medicine cabinet over the sink was simply gone, four empty holes in the wall where it had been attached. The second thing she noticed was that the lid was off the toilet tank. The inside of the tank had been gutted, and the chain and hook was noticeably missing. She felt something in her stomach drop at that, even though she wasn't sure that anything that had been there would have helped her pick the handcuffs. But she had missed her chance to obtain something potentially useful.

Then Clarice corrected herself. If Dr. Lecter had found pieces already missing from the tank, it's not like she would have been able to keep them. And he would noticed that something was missing the first time he tried to flush the toilet himself.

But the fact that the room had been completely stripped told her that this was where she was going to be left. All things considered, she supposed it could have been worse. At least she would have access to both water and a toilet.

Clarice stared blankly at her surroundings, before she remembered that she really did need to use the restroom.

After she was done, she saw that the toilet could still be flushed, but only if she reached into the tank and lifted the flapper manually.

When she washed her hands, she noticed a clean hand towel draped across the back of the sink. There was no place in the bathroom to store extra towels, and Clarice wondered if Dr. Lecter had actually gone looking for any clean linen that might be in the cabin. He was meticulous, so it wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility.

She suddenly had the absurd mental image of him putting clean sheets on the bed before he'd put Will in it. However, the longer she thought about it, the more probable it seemed. Will had been bloody all over after he had secured her and had stumbled toward the bedroom himself, but she hadn't noticed any blood on the quilt or the sheets when she had been left in the bedroom. Dr. Lecter must have changed the bed between patching Will up and giving him the sedative. On the surface it seemed an implausible thing to devote time to, but he was particular about arranging things to his liking.

Clarice shook her head to clear it and splashed water on her face. She might still be feeling the effects of the wine, but she was aware of it and was determined not to say anything else that wasn't considered.

When she opened the door, Dr. Lecter led her back to the bedroom.

She sat down on the bed, resigned to the routine of being handcuffed by now.

However, he said, "I'm afraid I must insist on both hands overnight."

Clarice's brows shot up as she realized what he meant. "I'm sleeping here?" She couldn't keep the incredulity out of her voice.

Dr. Lecter looked at her plainly. “If you’re uncomfortable, you may sleep on the floor. I can adjust the cuffs.”

The strange thing was, he genuinely meant it. There was nothing derisive in his tone, no amusement at her expense. He was going to tie her up, but he wasn’t going to make her share a bed—even with a man who was practically comatose—if it made her uncomfortable.

“Thank you, but the bed is more comfortable than the floor.” She certainly wasn’t sleeping on the bare floor if she had the option of a mattress. “I’m just surprised. I assumed I’d be in the bathroom.”

“I would prefer that the restroom remain available.”

So she’d been right, then, about why he’d removed her from the bathroom to begin with. She supposed in a cabin of this size, there were only so many stationary things present to secure handcuffs to, and so here she was.

“Why aren’t you taking the bed?” Clarice asked. There had to be a reason besides his consideration of where to put her. She had assumed he would want to stay with Will.

“Regardless of where you are, it is more prudent for me to sleep in the front room,” Dr. Lecter said. “By the door.”

“Afraid I might make a successful escape attempt?”

Dr. Lecter smiled. “That is one consideration.”

It was somewhat gratifying to hear he hadn’t ruled out the possibility, even though she felt it extremely unlikely at this point. “And the other?”

“I am not expecting company, but if any arrives, I would like to be aware of it as soon as possible.”

If the arrival of law enforcement wasn’t a factor, there weren’t many other people she could imagine him wanting to be ready for. “You think Benton had an accomplice?”

Dr. Lecter shook his head. “Everything Will described to me points to Benton working alone. But one should always be prepared.” He paused. “If someone did know what was occurring here, I would certainly like to meet them.”

She bet he would.

But that answered the question of why he was sleeping in the other room; he was keeping himself between the door and the vulnerable Will.

Nothing about Will and Dr. Lecter’s relationship was ambiguous, but it threw Clarice off balance to see him arrange his own actions around Will without a second thought, without any apparent inconvenience or bother. She would have said it was impossible for him to show true concern for another person, even a person that he was involved with—but there was suddenly no doubt in her mind that Dr. Lecter cared more about Will than he did himself.

It was something he shouldn't have seemed to be capable of, but he was made of contradictions.

Clarice sighed, before bringing her hands around the bar at the edge of the bed frame. Dr. Lecter snapped the handcuffs around each wrist, and then flipped off the light, leaving him silhouetted in the doorframe.

"I will see you in the morning," he said.

Clarice didn't think she could manage to say anything like 'good night' that would come out sounding *good*, so she simply nodded.

He left her then, but didn't shut the door, and she heard him moving about the front room for a few moments before that light went out as well, and everything was still and silent.

Clarice shifted from sitting to lying down as best she could. She hugged the edge of the bed and curled up on her side, facing the opposite wall. It was about the only way she could lie and not feel completely constrained by the handcuffs. She had to keep her wrists where they were, and lying on her side was the most natural way to do that.

It hardly mattered that there was another person in the bed; she was incapable of moving beyond the edge of it anyway. And Will wasn't going to be moving at all.

Clarice had always found the idea that two people couldn't sleep in the same bed without it meaning something ridiculous, so she didn't have any discomfort in that sense. She just couldn't believe that her day had ended with her sleeping in the same room as a serial killer. She had known being here overnight was going to be unpleasant, but she hadn't figured on it being bizarre.

Despite the fact that she chased psychopaths for a living, she had a relatively normal life. Only when it intersected with Hannibal Lecter did it become actively surreal.

Surreal was the only word to describe this entire experience.

Clarice took a deep breath, trying to put everything out of her mind and disconnect. With the wine she'd had, it wasn't that hard. She had developed the skill of sleeping no matter what was happening around her at the orphanage, and had honed the ability to fall asleep quickly during her career, when sleep sometimes meant a nap on a plane or in an empty office.

She felt herself drifting off easily, and sleep was a welcome oblivion.

Chapter 6

Clarice slept.

If Dr. Lecter ever came into the room to check on Will during the night, she wasn't aware of it. The first time she stirred was near dawn, the time her body was used to waking up. She opened her eyes long enough to see the beginnings of daylight creeping though the bedroom door, before she went back to sleep.

It wasn't like she had anywhere to be.

The second time she woke, it was because of the murmur of low voices and the heaviness of dragging footsteps. Even half asleep, she realized that Will must be up and that Dr. Lecter was helping him to the other room.

Clarice didn't move. She wasn't awake enough to actively feign sleep, only awake enough to decide that she was not getting up.

When some minutes passed without anything further, she changed positions, rolling onto her back and stretching out diagonally across the bed with her arms over her head. If Will came back, he could tell her to move. If Dr. Lecter wanted her awake, she assumed she would know about it.

As it was, she herself was going to put off starting today for as long as possible. There was no reason not to sleep in.

Clarice woke up again several hours later.

She was fully rested, and she knew there would be no going back to sleep even if she tried. The last thing she felt like doing was getting up and beginning what was sure to be a strange day, but there wasn't much to do besides push through it.

Clarice mostly felt resigned. She wasn't looking forward to having whatever conversation Dr. Lecter wanted to have, but she also wasn't worried about it. She wasn't worried about much at this point, which she recognized was not perhaps the best mindset to possess. But she couldn't even summon the uneasiness she'd felt during their conversation last night. She had been so careful not to offend, and while she didn't mean to abandon being polite, she was no longer concerned that some small infraction on her part was going to turn the situation on a dime.

Dr. Lecter could never be considered truly safe, but Clarice felt justified in the conviction that she would have to do something fairly horrible by his standards for him to hurt her. If his continued interest in conversing with her hadn't already confirmed that, the fact that she had spent the night where she had certainly did.

The night's sleep had cleared her head in more ways than one. She had made it this far, and now, staring up at the ceiling, an odd sort of easiness came over her. Clarice couldn't say that she was comfortable with her situation, but she was no longer uncomfortable.

Given the situation, that was saying quite a lot.

Clarice turned her head.

The door to the front room was open a few inches, light softly spilling in from beyond it. She shifted on the bed. Instead of verbally announcing that she was awake, Clarice pulled herself into a sitting position, letting the cuffs clang noisily against the bed frame as she sat up.

It produced the desired result. Dr. Lecter's shadow crossed the open doorway, and a second later, the door opened. He moved into the room, unlocking the handcuffs.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning," Clarice repeated, on autopilot. She stood, and he allowed her out of the room.

"I took the liberty of retrieving some of your things," Dr. Lecter said, gesturing toward the bathroom.

Clarice could see the bag of toiletries from her suitcase sitting on the back of the sink. "Thank you," she murmured, going into the bathroom and shutting the door behind her.

She was more relieved to have a toothbrush than she was annoyed that he had been through the things in her car. There were no great secrets in her suitcase. It was an airline-sized carryon that she kept packed at all times with two changes of clothes, another pair of shoes, a set of pajamas, and a one quart Ziploc bag full of toiletries.

Clarice used the restroom and then went about freshening up. The simple acts of brushing her teeth and washing her face seemed to make a world of difference. After she was done, Clarice gathered herself and opened the door.

She surveyed the room out of habit as she re-entered it. The couch had been pushed in front of the front door; undoubtedly Dr. Lecter had done it last night while he'd slept there. The curtains to the window were, of course, closed. Dr. Lecter himself was in the kitchen area, and Will sat in a recliner that had been pulled up to the table. She imagined Will probably felt as bad as he looked, but he was awake and coherent.

Both his and Dr. Lecter's eyes were on her as she stood in place. Even though nothing was said, it was clear that she was expected to join them. Clarice slowly approached the table. The smell of breakfast still hung in the air, and an empty but used plate sat in front of Will. Clarice's eyes lingered on it.

She wasn't precisely envious, as she knew exactly what had been on the plate, but she couldn't help being hungry at the idea of food. It had been almost twenty-four hours since

she'd eaten anything, and while that wasn't anywhere near what the human body could withstand, it was uncomfortable for someone who was used to regular meals.

Will saw her looking at his plate, and his expression flickered with slight exasperation as he glanced in Dr. Lecter's direction. He seemed to roll his eyes without actually doing so.

Then catching her gaze, he said, "You're welcome to anything you can find in the kitchen."

"Thank you," Clarice said.

She very purposefully did not look at Dr. Lecter for further permission. If Will had said it, it was true. She doubted that he and Dr. Lecter had discussed letting her eat beforehand, but either Will had known that Dr. Lecter wouldn't object, or the very act of Will saying it had made it so. The two of them were a unit.

Clarice moved toward the small area that served as the kitchen. Dr. Lecter was washing dishes and setting them on an open towel to dry. It struck her that there was no one to be washing them for. He and Will wouldn't need clean dishes after this, and nor was it the behavior of a good guest, as the owner of the cabin was dead. But Dr. Lecter was nothing if not fastidious, and perhaps washing dishes after one used them was simply what one did.

There was a particularly sharp-looking knife lying with the clean dishes on the towel. Clarice absently noted that whenever she wasn't restrained, Dr. Lecter had a knife close at hand.

"I'm afraid the cabinets are rather bare," he addressed her.

"I'm sure I can find something."

Dr. Lecter nodded, before a smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "There are always leftovers. If you change your mind."

"I'll manage, thank you," she said dryly.

Clarice had one goal: to get out of the kitchen as quickly as possible. There were altogether too many potentially useful things in the kitchen, and Dr. Lecter was far from being stupid enough to leave her in it alone. He had already paused in his task to watch her every movement, and she didn't relish drawing that out any longer than necessary. If she thought she could obtain something to help her pick the handcuffs later, that would be different, but she was more or less resigned that events were going to go as Dr. Lecter wished them to go.

Clarice opened the fridge of out morbid curiosity, but the state of it was exactly as she had expected, which was unclean and scattered with half-full fast food cartons. There were several soup cans in a cabinet, but she didn't enjoy the idea of being in the kitchen long enough to fix one of them. Finally, she found a box of unopened saltines, and figured that would have to do. As she closed the cabinet, she spied an apple on the countertop, and took that as well.

Dr. Lecter stepped to the side to let her wash the apple without being asked, but she could feel his eyes on her. She wondered if he thought the knife by sink was at all tempting to her,

if he was waiting to see what she would do. But weapons could be an illusion of power, and she had no illusions. Clarice had no doubt that he was more dangerous without a knife than she was with one, no doubt that he was skilled enough to disarm her even if she lunged at him. She was, as she had said last night, fixed in her decision.

Even if all that hadn't been true, she still couldn't bring herself to attack someone who wasn't a clear and immediate threat. Not even him.

Clarice didn't actually wish she could think differently or change who she was, but she had the idle thought that perhaps things would be less complicated if she didn't have such firm morals. On the other hand, it seemed likely that Dr. Lecter wouldn't have found an alternate version of her interesting enough to engage with, which instantly halted any further thoughts in that direction.

She looked at him, reaching for one of the clean glasses. "May I?"

"Of course," he said.

Clarice took the glass and filled it at the sink, trusting Dr. Lecter's meticulousness more than she trusted the cleanliness of any dishes in the cabinets, given the general state of the cabin.

Then she picked up her glass, her apple, and her box of crackers and went to the table. Clarice briefly glanced at Will, whose eyes followed her in turn as she sat down. She ignored him, taking a drink and then opening the saltines, pulling out one of the packages and eating a few crackers to start with. They were dry and boring, but they were plain and good to go into an empty stomach.

As she started on the apple, Dr. Lecter collected Will's dirty plate. Clarice stared past him as he started washing it. The whole scene was bizarre in its normalcy, and part of her railed against being included in it. The other part was too relieved to get something to eat to care. But the thing that struck her most was how Dr. Lecter operated as if nothing were amiss, as if it were perfectly ordinary for the three of them to be here. Clarice supposed that's what came with creating your own version of reality.

Will watched her while Dr. Lecter finished the dishes. It wasn't interest so much as it was casual vigilance. There was little Will could do to her, physically, should she decide to do something, but it would only take a word from him to direct Dr. Lecter's full attention to her.

After another few moments, Dr. Lecter wiped his hands on a towel and came to the table. He took the other wooden chair for himself, sitting to one side of Will. The smallness of the table and the space taken up by the recliner put Dr. Lecter as near to her as he was to Will. None of them were quite seated opposite each other, but both of them were between her and the door.

Clarice was hit with the feeling of having been exactly here before—a table and a talk and these two men across from her. The situation was just as strange as it had been last time, though not nearly as intimidating.

Dr. Lecter smiled, folding his hands on the table and looking at her. "Where shall we begin?"

Will spoke. “The beginning seems as good a place as any.”

Clarice glanced at him. She had been unsure if Will was even going to be interested in this conversation, or if he had simply intended to observe it. But it seemed that even if he wasn’t as interested as Dr. Lecter, he was interested enough.

“My beginning or yours?” she asked him.

“Perhaps the beginning that led to this encounter,” Dr. Lecter said. “Your profile of Will.”

Clarice looked back and forth between them. “That will only account for one half of the encounter.”

Dr. Lecter’s lips quirked. “If your profile is correct, then it should nearly account for both.”

“Very well,” Clarice said. She took a breath and focused on Dr. Lecter. “I was going to profile you, as an intellectual exercise. I didn’t get very far. It seemed… a task without purpose. Your reasons for killing are known, but don’t allow for any predictable pattern. However, it occurred to me that the same might not be true of Will. So I changed the direction of my efforts.”

“The intellectual exercise didn’t last long,” Will said.

“No, it didn’t,” she agreed. “It felt pointless doing a profile of Dr. Lecter because it wouldn’t help catch him. I work better when I have an objective.”

“Was I your objective or your means?”

“My objective was to catch an untraceable serial killer,” Clarice said evenly, “by finding a traceable one. All killers need to be caught.”

Will quirked a brow, dry amusement in his expression. “Indeed.”

There was a hint of a smile on Dr. Lecter’s face as he watched Will, and it remained there as he turned toward her once again.

“On the subject of killers,” Dr. Lecter said, “while there is no disputing my crimes, in other areas, our understanding must be a more fragile one.”

Clarice realized almost immediately that he was referring to the fact that while he himself was a convicted murderer, Will was not. “And yet that understanding is exactly what you want to discuss.”

Dr. Lecter tilted his head, mirth glittering in his eyes. “Understanding is understated. Admission is not a necessary component of our conversation.”

Will chuckled. “So long as we understand each other.”

He said it more to Dr. Lecter than he did to her, his tone wry but fond.

Dr. Lecter glanced at him, his own mouth curving upward at the remark. “Sins of omission, as it were.”

Clarice’s brow furrowed. “I know what I know, even if I can’t prove it. I’m not going to pretend that I don’t.”

“I would not have you do so,” Dr. Lecter said easily. “We must all be true to ourselves. You may say whatever you like, and I will take great pleasure in discussing it with you. But such a conversation may be had without confirmation.”

“I’d say the fact that I found you is confirmation enough.” Her eyes slid in Will’s direction. “I profiled a serial killer, and that’s what I got.”

Dr. Lecter smiled. “Then you must be secure in that knowledge. Your own experiences are evidence I cannot deny you.”

“Very well, Doctor,” Clarice said. As long as she didn’t have to act as if Will wasn’t a killer, she could live without a direct admission. She had already known they were both too smart to admit anything.

Clarice settled in her chair, pondering how to begin as she looked between the two of them. Dr. Lecter was watching her with a look of delighted expectation, already enjoying himself. Will’s expression was one of curiosity, and Clarice was suddenly struck by the very obvious fact that she was going to have to profile him to his face. For some reason, that seemed a markedly different prospect than a discussion of her profile with Dr. Lecter.

She glanced at Will before looking at Dr. Lecter again. “You give me a harsh critic for an audience, Doctor.”

Dr. Lecter grasped the immediate implication of Will being both the subject of and a participant in the conversation, though he realized she was referring to something else as well. He looked sideways at Will, a question in his eyes.

Will seemed to be expecting the look, and one corner of his mouth turned up as he answered. “People didn’t tend to speak in my classroom unless they were correct. Apparently my legacy lives on.”

“For that and other things,” Clarice said bluntly.

Will smirked.

Most of the talk at the Academy about Will Graham had been speculation about the teacher who had turned into a serial killer, though details about what it had actually been like to take his class were often included.

“My days of critiquing are long past,” he said. “Consider me an impartial party.”

With that, Clarice decided it was as good a time as any to begin. She kept her tone even and led with the facts, just as she would while reporting on any profile. “I determined that Will was a killer after our last encounter, based on his interest in Buffalo Bill, as well as our

conversation in Belvedere. However, it wasn't until recently that I tried to profile him. Our interactions during those events led me to several conclusions."

She slowly exhaled. "Will is extraordinarily intelligent and knows how to leverage that intelligence. The particular way he thinks, plus his experience and knowledge of law enforcement and forensics, would make him a very elusive killer, even though his crime scenes would be notable. His mutilation of Jame Gumb was extreme, indicating that he would take a very hands-on, intimate approach when he kills. Even though Gumb's mutilation was done post-mortem, it was done with a skilled hand and was not done on a whim.

"Will would hunt his victims with the same keen eye that he once used in the employ of the FBI. His choice of Buffalo Bill as a target was purposeful and planned. Every killer has a reason for what they do, and Will had a reason for putting in a considerable amount of effort into finding Buffalo Bill. He wanted to kill him, and he wanted to kill him quite a bit." She paused, remembering the way Gumb's death had ultimately played out. "Even if he didn't, in the end."

"Jame Gumb's death itself was more important than the circumstances of it," Dr. Lecter said.

"And yet Will was still driven to satisfy something afterward." Clarice's gaze darted to Will as she said, "He needed to connect with him in some way."

"You consider murder a connection?" Dr. Lecter asked, his eyes brightening.

"No," Clarice said simply. "But you do." She looked between them. "Both of you would."

Dr. Lecter nodded in acknowledgment. "That, I cannot deny."

Clarice brought her hands together. "Will has a way of thinking that can't be replicated. While that is a factor in his pathology, his defining characteristic would be that he only kills those he deems deserving."

"As do I," Dr. Lecter said.

"Will's definition of deserving would be more conventional than yours," Clarice said dryly.

Will snickered. "We can't all defy categorization."

Dr. Lecter turned toward him, and they shared a look that was half amusement, half understanding. "You sell yourself short, Will."

Will caught her gaze, a smirk playing about his lips. "And what would my conventional definition of deserving be?"

"Given your background in law enforcement and your actions regarding Jame Gumb, I would say that your victim profile would be comprised of murderers, with serial killers being of especial interest."

Will tilted his head, as if he were ruminating on a new idea. “Doing bad things to bad people feels good,” he said slowly. His eyes slid to Dr. Lecter. “So I’ve been told.”

The words hung in the air, significant and meaningless all at the same time.

When Clarice spoke again, she dropped any pretense of talking about Will in the third person and looked at him directly. “You rarely, if ever, deviate from your victim profile. You had the perfect opportunity to kill me at Gumb’s, had the idea appealed to you at all. It’s also notable that you didn’t particularly care that you had a witness. Most killers would deviate from their usual patterns under such circumstances, the drive to not get caught outweighing everything else.”

Will smiled coolly. “I didn’t get caught.”

“No,” Clarice said. “You didn’t.” She regarded him evenly. “Because you were prepared for me. But even when you weren’t prepared, your response was unchanged. I was nothing but an inconvenience for you yesterday,” she said, borrowing Dr. Lecter’s word. “From a purely practical standpoint, it would have made more sense to kill me.”

“That wasn’t the ending I desired,” Will said, sounding strangely genuine. “There was no reason for you to die.”

Clarice pressed her lips together. “That falls directly in line with my profile.”

“So it does,” Will said, his face a mask of indifference. Then he asked, “Can you as easily explain why Hannibal didn’t kill you yesterday?”

Clarice glanced at Dr. Lecter, who had been following their exchange with evident enjoyment. He had his hands clasped in front of him, and now his attention landed solely on her, his head tilted slightly as his eyes sparked with interest.

Clarice focused just past his gaze as she answered. “Because he likes me,” she said, in as neutral a voice as possible.

Dr. Lecter’s lips slowly turned up in a genuine smile, a smile without a trace of cutting amusement. He also didn’t deny it.

“If I had been anyone else,” Clarice continued, meeting his eyes, “regardless of whether I had inadvertently saved Will’s life, I would have been dead the second you walked in the door.”

“That is true,” Dr. Lecter said. “Fortunate for all of us, then, that we are who we are.”

Dr. Lecter favored her in some way; she had thought it yesterday, shortly after he’d handcuffed her, when she’d been considering the most prudent way to proceed. But only now did she have the perspective to comprehend the truth of it. It had been easier to entertain the idea that she was a toy he would prefer not to break, than it was to consider that she was actually esteemed by a cannibalistic serial killer.

“Fortunate indeed,” Clarice said. “Though I’m unclear as to what exactly I’ve done to be imparted such rare goodwill.”

“Details can be separated from the whole like threads from a tapestry,” Dr. Lecter said, “but only together do they create something distinctive. There is no single reason, nor list of such, that would adequately reflect the nature of our interactions.”

“Our interactions deviate from everything expected.”

“That’s why you’re interesting,” Will said. “You don’t fit Hannibal’s pattern.”

Dr. Lecter turned to Will, clearly intrigued by the related topic. Will gave him a smug look, and then met her gaze.

“Hannibal is drawn to distress. It presents him with the opportunity to offer a solution of his own making and to enjoy the results. But Hannibal has never seen you in distress; I’m not sure he wanted to.” Will tilted his head in consideration. “He was amused to send you into danger, and was delighted that you killed to escape it.”

“That pattern, she fits,” Dr. Lecter commented, like he couldn’t resist pointing it out.

Will’s lips quirked. “Not her practicality after the fact.”

“A pleasant surprise.”

Will continued, looking at her. “Your morals would never allow you to accept his assistance even if he convinced you that you needed it, which would be unlikely.” He paused, as if collecting his words. “You are… unmalleable. A rare experience for someone who trades in influence.”

Clarice spread her hands. “I’m sitting here doing exactly what he wants. You don’t call that malleable?”

“I call that practical,” Will said. “There’s a difference.”

That was true enough, she supposed. In the last twenty-four hours, Dr. Lecter had figuratively poked and prodded her, and he had been intensely interested in how she reacted. But it was a patient sort of curiosity, not a manipulation into something more insidious.

“Practicality seems to be one of my specialties,” Clarice said distantly. That, and making the best of whatever situation she was in. Neither of those were bad things, but somehow they had resulted in her having a casual breakfast conversation with serial killers.

“You also possess the gift of imagination,” Dr. Lecter said, inclining his head to her.

It took Clarice a moment to realize he was referring to her profile. She knew he wasn’t going to admit that she was correct, but she couldn’t help saying, “I didn’t imagine any of that.”

“A vivid imagination often leads to what others cannot see. It is a unique point of view.” His eyes darted in Will’s direction, amusement dancing behind them. “Or so I imagine.”

Clarice had never heard Will’s gifts referred to as imagination (usually ‘disorder’ was the word of the day), but if Dr. Lecter was drawing a parallel between their profiling abilities, he

was as good as saying she was right. Without saying it all, of course.

“You can imagine what you like,” Clarice said easily. “My profile is based in evidence. Would you like to know what I imagine?”

“I would hardly refuse,” Dr. Lecter said.

Clarice caught the idea that had floated in her mind half-formed, nothing more substantial than a feeling. “Will would be *better* than you,” she said. “I imagine his crime scenes would be immaculate, calling-card wise. There would be mutilations, but nothing that would ever show a connection or lay credit at a particular killer’s feet. The act of killing itself would be the most important part for him. The moment of the kill is important for you as well, but you can’t resist taking something to consume from your victims, and you enjoy your reputation. Will wouldn’t have any such compulsions or rituals, and he wouldn’t care about notoriety. He would be nearly perfect.”

Dr. Lecter’s smirk had only widened as she spoke; he wasn’t at all bothered at her conjecture that Will’s talents were above his. He looked at Will, his eyes bright and a delighted smile on his face.

Will seemed amused at Dr. Lecter’s amusement, but nothing more.

“What a fascinating picture you paint, Clarice,” Dr. Lecter said, turning back to her. “What else do you see?”

“The rest of the canvas is blurry,” Clarice admitted. “I have no idea how the two of you operate in tandem. Your profiles seem at odds with each other.”

“What you cannot divine, I cannot comment on,” Dr. Lecter said pleasantly. “There should remain some mystery to our lives, after all.”

Will was reflective. “Our design is ever changing, as we change.”

“Just so,” Dr. Lecter said.

“Something has changed,” Clarice said. “You were traced twice before because of your patterns, Dr. Lecter, but those trails have gone cold.”

Will’s lips twitched in the ghost of a smile, making her wonder if he was the one who had changed that, as well as what parts of him Dr. Lecter had changed in return.

Then Dr. Lecter said, “Tell me, how did you trace us?”

Clarice sighed. This was the part she hadn’t been looking forward to. It was one thing to tell them she knew that Will chose killers for victims, but it was another to lay out exactly how she had used that to find them. But answering still seemed to be her best option. If Dr. Lecter wanted to have a conversation, then they were going to have a conversation and she needed to participate.

“It was dumb luck and a hunch,” she finally said. “Even after I developed a profile, the two of you seemed impossible to track. No victims were going to be connected as being murderers; if they had been known to be killers, they would have already been in prison. I was at a dead end for a while, but eventually, I stopped looking for unusual crime scenes and started looking at cold cases, trying to determine if any of those killers had stopped killing because someone stopped them.” Then she spread her hands, gesturing vaguely in Will’s direction as she said, “I called you a traceable serial killer earlier, but you aren’t, not really. Even though you would have a discernible pattern, it was a search without direction. I didn’t find anything where I was actually looking.

“Then I came across this case,” she said. “It didn’t fall within my criteria, but there was something about it that wouldn’t let go of me. It wasn’t rational or logical; it was just a gut feeling. You and Dr. Lecter met because of a Minnesota case involving murdered teenage girls. And I thought if I had seen it, maybe you had seen it, too. I came here hoping to find some trace of you, some sign that you had been in the area searching for the killer. I never actually thought I’d encounter you, let alone like this.”

Will slowly nodded, but he didn’t seem to have anything further to add. Then he said, “How did you come to be here specifically?”

“I was talking to local law enforcement. The sheriff in town mentioned Charlie Benton’s name as someone who had helped in the investigation. I had time, so I came to talk to him.” She laughed bitterly. “Apparently he was the killer.”

“Benton was the killer,” Will repeated. He looked like he was going to continue, but then he fell silent.

Dr. Lecter picked up the thread of the conversation. “The case attracted our attention,” he said, deliberately vague, “as it attracted yours, for the similarities you mentioned.”

“The similarities were purposeful,” Will said, detached. “Though not too purposeful—they were *just* an echo enough to bring me here. Something new that reminded me of something old.” He stared past her as he said, “The girls were a means to an end. They were the lure.”

“You called Benton your admirer,” Clarice said, events beginning to crystallize in her mind. “You were what he was trying to catch.”

Will nodded, once. “He was obsessed.” He gave a self-deprecating smile. “He laid the trap for months and was always on the watch for us, but I was the one he wanted.”

“How were you separated?”

Dr. Lecter spoke. “Benton surprised us in a remote area and utilized a tranquilizer gun. When I came to, I was alone and there was no trace of Will.”

“Benton just left you there?” Clarice asked, shock coloring her voice. Having Dr. Lecter unaccounted for was the very definition of a loose cannon. “That seems… short-sighted.”

Will snorted. “Benton was insane.”

“What would you have done?” Dr. Lecter asked, regarding her closely.

“I’m sorry?”

“If you were Benton, would you have killed me?”

Clarice arched a brow. “I’m not Benton, and we discussed killing you last night.”

His smile only grew at her reticence. “Indulge me. Please.”

Clarice didn’t say anything, but Dr. Lecter merely watched her, the same expectant look on his face. Eventually, she decided that a game of the hypothetical hardly mattered, so she answered.

“*If* I were a killer, and I had been in Benton’s shoes, I would have shot you in the head,” she said plainly. “You’re too dangerous to leave anything up to chance.”

Dr. Lecter was clearly diverted by her answer. “As practical as I would expect,” he said. “Fortunately for us, many others do not share your practicality.”

“Being insane comes with a certain loss of practicality,” Clarice said.

“A providential conundrum.” Dr. Lecter smoothed his hands over the table. “Though I am loath to admit it, it was not unlikely that Benton’s plan would have succeeded, at least in part. It was doubtful I could have located Will before Benton’s design for him came to pass, despite my searching.”

Will’s eyes had been resting on Dr. Lecter, but they drifted to her as he spoke again.

“Benton liked to talk,” Will said. “And he had a captive audience. He told me how he killed his second girlfriend and got away with it. A drifter was next after that, followed by sporadic victims through the years. Though smart, he was an opportunistic killer, addicted to the rush of murder. He began to compare himself to other known killers, and started discussing true crime on the Internet. His favorite site was Serial Killer Royalty.”

“I’ve encountered it,” Clarice said shortly. Tattle Crime was tabloid journalism that catered to the macabre, but Serial Killer Royalty was a different animal altogether. It was strictly a forum, populated by people who idolized serial killers and possibly even emulated them. Famous murderers were analyzed in loving detail and speculation about open cases was rampant. Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham were discussed regularly.

“He became fixated with our case over the years, my part of it in particular,” Will said. “He called himself my ultimate fan. He was disappointed that I was never on the site, because he was always watching, hoping to make contact. In the end, he decided that the ultimate communion would be killing me, in order to show that he truly understood me.”

“And he did, almost,” Clarice realized. “Or he wouldn’t have known how to get you here.”

Will nodded. “He had read a number of theories over the years, and written some of his own. But his favorite, he kept to himself. It’s a matter of record that I’ve killed three people: Garret

Jacob Hobbs, Randall Tier, and Francis Dolarhyde. That was the basis for his conclusion that I would be a vigilante."

"A flawed and simplistic supposition," Dr. Lecter said.

It was flawed, and the pathology was off in ways that she had figured out months ago. But the bare bones of it were there. "Close enough to the truth to achieve the desired results," she said without pleasure.

"Close enough," Will said. "Since Benton was already enjoying murder, he decided the best way to find me was to make me find him. And so he created a spectacle to attract my attention. The rest," he said, gesturing to the room around them, "you know. He took his time; he wanted to experience my death for as long as possible. He told me he planned to display me somewhere Hannibal would see, after which he would kill him."

"The manner of my death," Dr. Lecter said, "Benton apparently did not care deeply about, except as it related to Will. He wanted me to see what he had done, and for it to be the last thing I saw."

His gaze landed on Will as he finished, and just for an instant, so brief she almost missed it, she saw his heart laid bare. There was pain at the idea of irrevocable loss, mixed with the relief of escaping it. It was too private an expression, and Clarice was certain it was a rare loss of control on his part.

Dr. Lecter didn't notice her noticing. Will did.

"Hubris has been an unwelcome bedfellow," Will said, giving her something else to focus on, "and my most recent companion."

Clarice realized what he meant, and what he couldn't say himself. "You're used to being the hunter," she said. "You came here to kill him, never suspecting that all the while he was waiting to kill you."

Will's lips stretched in a smile without humor.

"An unwelcome companion," Dr. Lecter said, following Will's thoughts, "but perhaps a necessary one. A reminder not to become complacent in our advantage, lest we fail to keep it." Dr. Lecter brought his hands together and looked between them. "After all, we can hardly rely on serendipity to assist us thrice."

Clarice knew that 'serendipity' referred to her. "My assistance last time was manipulated. My assistance this time was happenstance."

"Not entirely," Will said.

Her eyes snapped in his direction, and he regarded her with a cool gaze.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Benton didn't have a gun," he said simply.

Clarice felt a sinking feeling, like someone was pulling the rug out from under her in slow motion.

Will continued talking. “You shot to injure, as was called for by the situation. Taking a man into custody is preferred if at all possible. Once Benton was down, you would have been unlikely to wound him further without provocation or reason. So that’s what I gave you.”

She could feel Dr. Lecter watching her, but she didn’t look away from Will.

“You wanted me to kill him,” she said, holding his stare.

“I wanted him removed from the situation, a variable no longer in play. You were my means.”

Clarice thought of what Will had done to her in Belvedere, how he had stood aside and waited for the outcome of her encounter with Gumb. “Did you get satisfaction from forcing my hand?”

Will shook his head. “The event of his death was more important than how it occurred. I said what I needed to say to achieve the result I desired.”

Clarice processed that, as much as she could. Then she asked, “What were you thinking when I kicked in the door?”

“I thought I was going to live. My next thought was dedicated to escape.” Will’s gaze turned inward, his eyes focused blankly on nothing as he continued. “I saw you, but you didn’t see me, not really. You saw a victim on a hook, bloody and beaten. You were alone, which meant you were all I had to overcome. I would use you to get rid of Benton. I would keep my face down until you freed me. I would act helpless, and then I’d have you. That was my design.”

“I see,” she said, slowly nodding.

Dr. Lecter remained silent, watching Will with a quiet sort of pride.

Will had only had a second or two yesterday to work all that out, yet he had done so and then executed his strategy flawlessly. She could admire the skill required, if nothing else. He truly was never to be underestimated.

Clarice took a breath, before looking back at Will, new words hovering on her tongue. She thought about not saying them, but it wasn’t like she would have the chance to say them again. “Do you know,” she said, “that the only two deadly force encounters I’ve had have somehow involved you?”

Will’s brows rose and his mouth twitched with a smirk that didn’t quite form. “How does that make you feel?”

Clarice gave the question appropriate consideration, despite the cliché that it was. “I don’t know,” she finally said. “The idea is still settling. I resent that you used me to kill Benton. But I don’t feel guilt over his death. I made the only decision I could make with the information I had available. That’s all any officer can do.”

“No action you could have taken would have resulted in his living,” Will said, in a ghoulish sort of consolation. “His death had already been set in motion.”

“But if you had killed him, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.” Clarice studied him for a moment before asking, “If he’d still been alive after you’d gotten free, would you have taken your time with killing him?”

Will shook his head, once. “Insanity doesn’t always come with a loss of practicality,” he said, sardonic.

Clarice raised a brow. “You don’t consider yourself insane.”

“No. But that’s what I’m considered.” Will tilted his head, then said, “The profile was very educational.”

She laughed without humor. “Was it? Seems to me you had already heard most of it.”

There was some consolation in that, at least. In telling Dr. Lecter how she had found them, Clarice had ensured that none of it would ever work again, but it wouldn’t have worked anyway. Will’s encounter with Benton had struck him harder than the threat of the FBI ever could. It was unlikely that Will would change his pattern, but he had the talents to make sure he was never again discoverable because of it.

“Your ideas were more finely honed,” Will said. “Benton’s were a blunt instrument.”

“A blunt instrument that did the job,” Clarice said. “Benton caught you.”

“Almost,” Will said, a smile playing about one corner of his mouth. “Just like you almost caught me.”

“And almost doesn’t count,” she responded automatically. The words grated at her, even though they were true.

She and Benton had both caught him, but their respective successes had been fleeting, and Will had managed to seize the advantage all the same. Will had been beaten, bruised, and barely upright, but that hadn’t stopped him from being the most dangerous person in the room.

“It counts,” Will acknowledged. “Just not the way you wanted it to.”

“If one has no failures,” Dr. Lecter said, “one cannot adequately appreciate one’s successes.”

Clarice quietly sighed. “My experiences here are both a success and a failure.” She had figured out what no one else at the FBI had, yet the results had been far from what she desired or expected.

“Then you may draw equal parts satisfaction and disappointment from them,” Dr. Lecter said, amusement in his eyes.

Will chuckled. “Everyone has ‘the one that got away.’”

Clarice thought of her conversation with Dr. Lecter last night. “Are you the ones who got away from me, or am I the one who got away from you?”

“Whichever you prefer,” Dr. Lecter said smoothly.

She smiled at the answer, even though she felt it wasn’t as flexible as that. They were most certainly slipping through her grasp, but she could hardly claim the reverse. “I’m not ‘getting away.’ You’re letting me go.”

“You may tell whatever version of events you choose. After all, I will hardly be in a position to contradict you.”

“I won’t be telling a version of events. I’ll be telling the truth.” Even as she said it, Clarice realized how outlandish the truth was going to sound. But she pushed that thought to the back of her mind, as something to deal with later.

Will was watching her, a smirk on his face.

“Did you have one that got away?” she asked, already suspecting the answer.

Will and Dr. Lecter turned to look at each other, both of them perfectly in sync and identical in their satisfaction. Will’s eyes remained on Dr. Lecter as he replied.

“Not anymore.”

As she observed them, Clarice was again hit with how familiar this all felt. Three years ago, she had sat across a table just like this and watched them react as one to something she’d said.

The more things changed, the more they stayed the same. She already knew this conversation was going to end exactly as that one had. After it concluded, the two of them would simply walk out the door and as good as disappear. No matter what she did, Dr. Lecter and Will always seemed to be one step ahead of her.

Clarice didn’t know if she could ever change that. But she certainly wasn’t going to stop trying.

Chapter 7

Clarice remained at the table with Dr. Lecter while Will excused himself to the restroom. She couldn't help but wince in sympathy as she watched his slow, pained steps.

Dr. Lecter also watched as Will disappeared into the restroom and shut the door, but his expression was neutral.

"His recovery is promising," he said. "Nothing was too badly damaged and no infection has set in. We will be leaving shortly."

Clarice nodded. She had sensed their conversation was nearing an end, that this was all nearing an end.

"I'm honestly surprised you were even in the country," Clarice said.

"There are ways in and out, if one knows how to look. But to own the truth, this will likely be our last sojourn here. There are more agreeable shores to visit."

"Because of what happened to Will?"

"Because of the ensuing complications."

Clarice raised a brow. "Am I an ensuing complication, Doctor?"

"Your profile of Will certainly is, as is the insight it will provide the FBI."

Clarice hesitated, debating whether she should state the obvious. But it was obvious, and therefore it was something he already knew. Her saying it wasn't suddenly going to give him the idea.

"You could easily ensure that my profile never left this room."

Dr. Lecter smiled, almost indulgently. "Is your profile of Will contained so neatly, held only in your mind and in the echoes between these walls?"

"No," Clarice said. At this very moment, all of her notes about Will, from her final profile to her initial scribbling, as well as the copies of open serial killer cases she had pored over, were in a box under her kitchen table. Even if she was never seen again, the contents of the box would point fairly conclusively to exactly why she had disappeared.

"I thought not," Dr. Lecter said. Then he tilted his head and said, "Tell me, Clarice, have the lambs stopped screaming?"

The change in topic momentarily threw her, but Clarice collected herself soon enough. "I still wake up sometimes with their cries ringing in my ears," she said. "But the dreams are rare now."

Dr. Lecter watched her attentively. “And are the lambs silenced only when you end another’s plight?”

Clarice gave a bitter laugh. “No,” she said. “More like the reverse.”

Dr. Lecter didn’t say anything, but his inquisitive look was enough of a prompt for her to continue.

“I only dream of the lambs now after a failure,” she said.

His expression smoothed, and he looked at her with renewed interest. “A failure,” he repeated. “Will you dream of the lambs due to your failure here?”

“No.”

Dr. Lecter nodded, as if he had already guessed as much. “They occur when you fail to save someone.”

“Yes.” She paused, and then said, “I didn’t have a single dream from the day I became an agent until the first time a case went wrong.”

Dr. Lecter clasped his hands, and he leaned almost imperceptibly closer, interest dark in his eyes. “Tell me about the first person you couldn’t save.”

Clarice was suddenly struck by Will’s words about Dr. Lecter being drawn to distress. It was true that Dr. Lecter had never encountered her in a situation where she was traumatized or reeling, but he had shown a fascination with painful memories—her father’s death, her running away from the ranch, and now, her first failure in the field.

But she would answer his questions, simply because it was easier to do so. There was nothing to be lost in telling him what he wanted to know. Though she wasn’t entirely sure there was anything to be gained, either. Dr. Lecter wasn’t going to hurt her at this point, not out of whimsy or because she disobliged him. Clarice felt that she could evade the question entirely, and all he would do was smile, tie her up in the bathroom, and be on his way.

Still, she was pragmatic, and saw no reason to push the boundaries simply because she could. While this would likely be their last encounter, she was going to save any boundary pushing on the off chance that a time might come when she would actually need it.

Her train of thought was interrupted by the sound of the bathroom door opening. Dr. Lecter glanced over her head, a question in his eyes as he looked at Will.

“I’ve got it,” Will said tiredly. Clarice saw him ambling toward the bedroom in her peripheral vision.

Assured that Will didn’t need any assistance, Dr. Lecter’s gaze returned to her, as sharp and expectant as ever.

Clarice brought her hands together. “It was a girl,” she said slowly. “Well, a woman.” The victim had been twenty, but she had looked nothing more than a girl when she had been tiny

and curled up and dead. “The case was given to us after only one death, as it was obvious that it was the work of a serial killer. A woman had been buried alive in a coffin, with calling cards left saying that she had been taken.” Clarice kept her voice even as she recited the basic facts of the case. “After she had died from suffocation, he released her location. Then he said there would be others.

“It wasn’t strictly my case,” she continued, “but I was on the team. When another family received a note two weeks later, we did everything, but it wasn’t enough. When the time was up, he left a message stating where she was. We dug her up with her parents standing right there behind us—she’d been buried on land they owned. It was horrible.”

“Had she clawed the coffin lid?”

“No. She was just lying on her side, curled up like she was asleep. Her parents took that to mean that she never woke up. I let them think that. The first girl wore her fingers bloody, and it was clear that the killer’s pathology included wanting his victims to know what was happening to them. I think she woke up and she knew, but she somehow kept her head and didn’t work herself into a panic, and managed to conserve her oxygen for as long as possible. Not that it mattered.”

Dr. Lecter tilted his head again. “And what did you do?”

“I went home and cried. I felt empty and useless,” she said plainly. “I dreamed about the lambs screaming that night. I still felt empty the next morning. But I went to work. Five days later, I caught him, before he ever took another girl. He made a mistake, and it led me to him.”

“I remember reading about it,” Dr. Lecter said. “Your name was noted as being instrumental in apprehending the killer.”

Clarice nodded. She had been commended in the press for being the agent who broke the case. No one had been blamed for not being in time to prevent the second girl’s death, beyond law enforcement as a whole. Every FBI agent and police officer available had been on a county-wide search that day.

“It was little consolation at the time,” she said. “It felt strange to be praised after something I considered a personal failure, even though I was successful in catching him. I could still see the girl I couldn’t save, could hear her mother crying. But… but it passed. I made it pass. I knew if I couldn’t get over losing someone, I wouldn’t be able to help anyone else in the future, so I put it behind me.”

“Was it easier or harder the next time it happened?”

“It hasn’t happened. Not yet.” Then she clarified, saying, “I don’t mean that we haven’t had multiple victims from one killer before the case was solved. I mean that of the people we had known to have been taken by a particular killer, who we were in a position to find before they were killed, I’ve only lost one.”

Dr. Lecter inclined his head in a nod. “Those types of cases are rarer.”

“They are. Most of the time, there’s no sign of a killer striking until we have a body.” She pressed her lips together, and added, “Cases that involve kidnapping and then murder make me think of Buffalo Bill.”

“A reasonable association.”

“Then I think of you.”

Dr. Lecter’s eyes brightened, and one corner of his mouth turned up. “Am I often in your thoughts?”

“No,” Clarice said, honestly. “You were something else I was going to put behind me.”

His smirk only widened.

“But if I was ever reminded of Buffalo Bill,” she continued, “I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t separate you from that case in my mind if I tried. But until I decided to profile you, those thoughts were fleeting. I didn’t dwell on them.” Clarice paused, then said, “That didn’t stop them from being there, just under the surface. Our interactions were… a formative experience after formative years.”

Dr. Lecter’s expression turned from amusement to something genuine, and he smiled one of his rare true smiles.

Clarice smiled in turn, but her smile was dry. “You enjoy the significance of that.”

“How could I not?” he said, pleasure still sparkling in his eyes.

She wasn’t surprised that he enjoyed impacting her life, changing how she viewed the world in some way, even if that had been an unplanned effect of their interactions. It had taken her a long time to realize how her experiences in catching Buffalo Bill and navigating Dr. Lecter had tested everything that she was, and given her a foundation that was unlikely to be shaken by anything else. Despite the limited amount of time they had interacted, and as reluctant as she was to admit it, Dr. Lecter held a singular position in her life.

But then, she occupied a singular position in his as well, or she wouldn’t be sitting here.

“And now that you have dwelt on such thoughts?” he asked. “What have you discovered?”

“I’ve gained understanding.”

“Of yourself or of myself?”

“Both,” Clarice said.

“Good. An understanding of oneself, and of oneself in relation to others, is fundamental.”

Clarice raised a brow. “Fundamental to what, Doctor?”

“Whatever you choose to pursue,” he said easily. “We all have different pursuits, but self-knowledge is the key to true experiences.” His eyes drifted to a point behind her. “As I so often tell Will.”

Will snorted in amusement. He slowly made his way back into the room, coming up beside her. He rested his hand on the back of her chair, heavily, with weight behind it. When taken on the surface level, the action was a very unsubtle gesture of dominance, but Clarice knew that wasn’t what this was. This was Will, worn-out from barely exerting himself, leaning on her chair because it was simply the closest thing at hand for support.

Dr. Lecter noticed as well. “You should sit,” he said to Will.

“I can sit in the car.”

“That is true.” With that, Dr. Lecter stood himself.

Clarice noticed that Will had a sweater over his shirt, and that he had his shoes on. This was it; they were leaving.

Dr. Lecter moved to the kitchen, opening a cabinet under the sink. He pulled out a package of Styrofoam cups, opened it and took one out, before precisely twisting the tie back and putting the package back in the cabinet.

Clarice didn’t realize the cup was for her until Will said, “Get your crackers.”

She edged out of her chair on the other side, picking up the box of crackers and taking the cup from Dr. Lecter. Her food and water for the next twenty-four hours.

“Shall we?” Dr. Lecter said, gesturing forward as if he were escorting her to dinner.

Clarice preceded him into the bathroom, setting the cup on the edge of the sink and putting the box of crackers upright on the floor. She blankly surveyed her surroundings, even as she felt Dr. Lecter come up behind her.

“May I at least have the quilt from the bedroom?” she asked without turning around.

“Of course.”

He stepped out of the room and allowed her to retrieve it. Clarice pulled the quilt from the bed as he watched; she brought it back to the bathroom and folded it in half and then in half again before spreading it on the floor. It wasn’t thick, but it was something between her and the cold tile.

Clarice heard the clink of metal, and when she straightened, she saw the handcuffs in Dr. Lecter’s hand. She had the mad thought that this was her last chance to resist, to not simply be compliant with her own imprisonment. But this was also her last opportunity to accept her circumstances with dignity, and she was decided that she wasn’t going to struggle against something she couldn’t change.

Clarice exhaled, resigned.

“I wish we could have a more elegant parting,” Dr. Lecter said. “Someday, perhaps, we may meet without inconveniences.”

“I doubt that,” Clarice said frankly. She could never encounter him without the duty to arrest him, and he would always find that inconvenient. “You know I won’t stop trying to find you.”

“I would be disappointed if you did,” he said sincerely. “You must follow your nature, as all things do.”

“And where will your nature lead you after this, Dr. Lecter?”

“One never knows.” He glanced at Will, who was leaning against the doorframe. “The possibilities are endless.”

Then Dr. Lecter turned to her again. “Your phone is charging in the other room,” he said, “though I took the liberty of disabling voice commands. But there will be no difficulty in locating you through it.”

Clarice nodded. Still, a small part of her couldn’t help but feel incredibly trapped. There was no reason why the FBI wouldn’t be able to find her by tracking her phone, but she also knew that technology wasn’t infallible. The idea of being left here when no one else knew where she settled unpleasantly in her stomach. “What happens if something goes wrong?” she asked, pointlessly.

She was surprised when Will answered.

“You saved my life,” he said. “You’re not going to die on the off chance of police incompetence.”

Clarice looked at him, and he continued.

“Tomorrow evening, I’ll contact Freddie Lounds and tell her we’ve left our latest victim here. It’s a certainty that she’ll show up personally within as many hours as she can get a flight. You’ll be found.” Will’s lips quirked upward. “You’d better hope the police get here first. Otherwise you’ll have to talk to her.”

“And what would happen if I did talk to her?” Clarice asked. “Told her everything that happened here?” She had wondered before if Dr. Lecter would be displeased with her discussing him publicly, even though she had no plans of doing so.

Will shook his head in response to her unasked question. “The only consequence of your talking to Freddie Lounds would be your talking to Freddie Lounds.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’ll become part of the sensation,” he said. “If you tell Freddie Lounds everything that happened here, I can almost guarantee you she’ll frame your story with a headline to the effect of: ‘FBI Agent Sleeps with Psychopath Will Graham.’”

Clarice glared. “I was a prisoner, and you were *unconscious*.”

Will was indifferent. “That’s what Freddie would call semantics.”

“I would advise against speaking to Miss Lounds,” Dr. Lecter said. “She often paints her subjects in an unflattering light.”

Clarice had known that much already. She had no intention of talking to Freddie Lounds, having somehow miraculously avoided it so far. It wasn’t that they had never spoken, only that Clarice herself had never been the focus of any of Freddie’s stories and she intended to keep it that way.

“Maybe someday I’ll write something about this,” Clarice said absently, “publish it posthumously.”

“After my death or yours?” Dr. Lecter asked.

“Both, I think.”

“A shame,” he said. “I should have liked to have read it.”

“Do you often read about yourself, Dr. Lecter?”

Dr. Lecter smiled. “There are so many differing opinions. Someone always has new insights on the matter.” His tone told her what he thought of those insights. She imagined he enjoyed reading incorrect attempts to diagnose him.

“I’m surprised Freddie Lounds is still writing,” Clarice said bluntly, “given what she writes about you.”

“Miss Lounds has her uses,” Dr. Lecter said.

Apparently she must. Clarice vaguely wondered whether Freddie Lounds knew or cared that she was only alive because Dr. Lecter found her useful.

Dr. Lecter opened one of the handcuffs, and then he gestured toward the sink. “If you please.”

Clarice sighed and sat down on the quilt. Dr. Lecter knelt beside her. He took her left wrist, snapped a cuff around it, and then secured the other cuff to the pipe.

It was done.

“It was truly a pleasure, Clarice,” he said, a smile dancing in his eyes. “Though I hardly expect the feeling is mutual.”

Being held against her will could hardly be described as a pleasure, but the whole day had certainly been an experience. She had untangled what had been a tangle in her life, and she no longer felt that her earlier encounter with Dr. Lecter was something she needed to forget about or leave unexamined. It simply was what it was, only now she understood it.

“It wasn’t *not* a pleasure,” Clarice admitted, her expression wry. “I learned something, and learning is always enjoyable.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Dr. Lecter said. He stood. “This may very well be the last time we speak; such opportune circumstances can only be arranged by chance and fate.”

Clarice arched a brow. “Do you believe in fate, Dr. Lecter?”

“I believe that the world is a wondrous place and we are here to experience it,” he said. “Though we may not meet again, I will think of your any time your name appears. Will you think of me?”

“You’ve ensured that I think of you at least once a year,” Clarice said, referencing the Christmas cards.

“One should always let friends know they’re in one’s thoughts during the holidays.” Dr. Lecter smiled again. “Now, it is truly time for us to depart.”

He glanced at Will, who nodded. Then Will moved against the doorframe, shifting his weight away from it to stand by himself.

They both look down at her in unison.

“Goodbye, Clarice,” Dr. Lecter said.

Clarice held his gaze. “Goodbye, Dr. Lecter.”

Will was staring straight at her. When she looked at him, he simply said, “Thank you.”

Clarice nodded. Almost as an afterthought, she said, “You’re welcome.”

Will turned, and Dr. Lecter followed him out.

Dr. Lecter flipped off the light switch in the bathroom, but left the door mostly open. She heard their steps cross the floorboards, and then the sound of the front door opening and closing. Moments later, the engine of their car came to life, but it wasn’t long before the noise faded entirely as they drove away.

Everything was silent, and she was alone.

Clarice’s eyes had adjusted to the dimmer light, and it was more than enough to see by. The light fixture in the cabin’s main room had been left on, but it was far enough removed from her that she wouldn’t have a problem sleeping later. She would have to go to the bathroom with the door open, but as she was the only one here, it hardly mattered.

She rattled her cuffed hand, simply to do it more than anything. Clarice knew she was well and truly stuck, though she couldn’t help cataloging the contents of the bathroom once more. But if there had been nothing helpful here before, there was truly nothing here now. She eyed her left hand dubiously; she had heard of people getting out of handcuffs by dislocating their thumbs, but she knew they seriously injured themselves as often as not, and it would be easy

to hurt herself and still not manage to get free. Unless the cabin spontaneously caught fire or another serial killer walked in the door, she wasn't desperate enough to attempt an escape that she had no practical knowledge about achieving.

No, she was resigned to the fact that she was here and she wasn't leaving anytime soon. It would be at least a day before someone found her, though unlikely to be more than a day and a half. Undoubtedly the time would pass slowly and uncomfortably. But, Clarice reflected, at least it would give her time to think.

And she had plenty to think about.

Chapter 8

The only clue Clarice had as to how much time was passing was the light that came through the bathroom doorway. She rationed her crackers, eating a few every little bit with some water in the hopes of keeping herself from becoming truly hungry. No good would come from not eating, because then she would be hungry enough to eat half the box at once. Her phone never rang, even as the day crept on. Clarice hoped that only meant that Dr. Lecter had set the phone to silent.

For a long while, she was occupied with figuring out exactly what she was going to say about this entire encounter. Until this morning, Clarice hadn't even considered leaving out anything that had happened, but now she was having second thoughts. Dr. Lecter's comment about telling whatever version of events she chose had rankled her at first, but she was beginning to question what was relevant to include and what wasn't.

The most relevant thing, of course, was her profile of Will—how she had formed it, and how it had led her here. The ensuing run in with Dr. Lecter and Will was less relevant, as far as how it contributed to apprehending them. Much like what had happened in Belvedere, a large amount of the encounter revolved around conversations about her. Clarice wouldn't withhold anything that was pertinent to the investigation, but most of what had occurred here was far from that.

The last twenty-four hours had become something that was oddly personal. It was unfortunate that her life included a personal connection with a serial killer, but that simply seemed to be the state of things now. Despite the fact that Clarice had untangled Dr. Lecter's place in her life, it still was not something she wanted to publicize, even within the FBI. No matter what angle she examined things from, Clarice could find nothing that would be lost to law enforcement by leaving out some details of her time here.

She would be upfront about the fact that she had investigated Dr. Lecter and Will Graham despite Crawford telling her to leave it alone. She would admit that she had made a mistake in coming here on her own. She would report how Will had tricked her into killing Benton, and how he had gotten the better of her afterward. She would rightfully say that Dr. Lecter had kept her prisoner here.

Other things, Clarice slowly decided not to mention. She wouldn't mention that she had sat down to two meals with Dr. Lecter, or that they had shared long conversations. She wouldn't mention that she had been more or less free at various points, because she hadn't been. Unless someone had dealt with Dr. Lecter themselves, had stood in a room alone with him pinned in place by his gaze, they couldn't understand that being untied was far from being free.

Clarice was prepared to take blame for things that were her fault, and would accept any consequences that followed. She wasn't prepared to be held accountable for things she had no control over, and Dr. Lecter was most definitely something she had no control over.

She would explain what she could explain, but she wouldn't mention what she couldn't.

Eventually, the brighter light of daylight faded, and all that was left was the illumination from the bulb in the living room.

Clarice slept. There was little else to do, and even though it was hard to get comfortable, once she had fallen asleep, she managed to stay asleep or half-asleep. Even when she opened her eyes in the morning and saw daylight through the door, she dozed, seeing no particular reason to be up. But sometime around what she guessed was midmorning, she was truly awake.

She used the restroom with some effort, washed her free hand in the sink, and then ate nearly an entire roll of crackers for breakfast. She still had a half a roll left, and she hoped she wouldn't have to eat it at all. Surely Ardelia had realized something was wrong by now; surely after her phone was traced it would only be a matter of time.

After a bit, Clarice stood as much as she was able and went through the routine of brushing her teeth one handed and washing her face one handed. Dr. Lecter had left her her bag of toiletries, though she had noticed yesterday morning that he had removed useful things like her nail file. Doing everything with one hand cuffed below the sink was time-consuming, but it wasn't like she didn't have the time to kill.

It was in the afternoon that she heard the engine of a car.

Clarice sat up, instantly on alert.

She heard the sounds of a car door—two doors—and then footsteps coming up the few stairs that led to the cabin's front door.

There was a knock.

"Charlie? It's Bill Jenkins."

"Chief Jenkins!" Clarice called in relief. "Open the door!"

He did so easily, the door swinging inward, its knob broken from when she had kicked it in.

"What in the…?" he mumbled, undoubtedly seeing the blood that stained the living room floorboards. "Charlie?"

"Chief Jenkins, it's Agent Starling," she said. "I'm handcuffed in the bathroom. Could you please get me loose?"

The next moment the bathroom door opened, and Jenkins stood there, looking a bit stunned. He quickly recovered, though, and fumbled on his belt for a handcuff key.

"Thank you," she said, standing up after he unlocked her.

They exited the bathroom, and Jenkins appraised her with the look of a man who knew he was going to receive bad news. “Where’s Charlie?”

“Dead,” Clarice said. “Beyond that, I don’t know. He was the one killing the girls.”

He shook his head. “I got a call from the FBI, saying you were missing and they had traced your phone to this location. I couldn’t think why you’d still be here, only that it couldn’t be good.”

At that moment, the front door slammed open as a young officer pushed through it in panic.

“Out back, sir!” he blurted to Jenkins.

Jenkins immediately moved to the door, Clarice close behind him. She belatedly realized that she was still in her socks; she hadn’t had her shoes since Will had taken them yesterday.

Almost in the same instant, she spotted them on the floor, sitting in the corner behind the door. She grabbed them and put them on, quickly following Jenkins and the officer out the door and around the back of the cabin.

There was a small shed out back, and the officer gestured to one side of it. Jenkins walked around the shed and stared for a moment before abruptly turning in the other direction.

Clarice rounded the shed herself, already knowing what she was going to find. It was Benton.

His body was hanging from a tree, his feet just off the ground. There was a rope knotted around his wrists, dragging him up to hang in exactly the position he had hung Will. He was slashed open from neck to groin, and the remains of his innards lay in a messy pile at his feet. Other parts of his body were pierced with screwdrivers, making him look like a haphazard pincushion. At first, the display reminded Clarice of the Wound Man, one of Dr. Lecter’s earlier calling cards. But the mutilations weren’t complex enough for that. It was only when she brought herself to look at Benton’s face that she realized why the screwdrivers were placed as they were. Benton had three screwdrivers through this face, in the exact places that Will had medical glue on his. She had no doubt that every place Benton was impaled matched a wound he had inflicted on Will. Dr. Lecter would have replicated them all.

Clarice was somewhat astonished to realize that this was the first time she had ever seen one of Dr. Lecter’s mutilations in person. It seemed strange to walk one of his crime scenes, like this was just another case, when it was so far from just another case. Of course, there was also the small matter that she was the one who had killed Benton.

She sighed and turned to Jenkins. “One or both of us needs to call the FBI.”

Clarice told Jenkins the bare facts of what had happened with Benton, as well as the fact that Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham had been here. She ascertained that Crawford was the one who had called him when her phone had been traced, and then she called Crawford back herself, Jenkins offering her his own phone as they stood in the yard.

“Crawford,” he answered.

“It’s Clarice,” she said. “I’m fine. And yes, I’m in Minnesota.”

“Why are you in Minnesota?” There was relief in his voice, but there was also an edge there. She suspected he’d realized she wasn’t simply on vacation. “And what the hell happened?”

“I’ve been combing through cold cases I thought might be related to Will Graham,” Clarice said bluntly. “I was investigating what seemed like a dead end and accidentally found the killer who’d been dismembering Minnesota girls, who I shot. I also found Will Graham, who was the killer’s next intended victim, and then Dr. Lecter found me. I’ve been handcuffed to a sink for the last twenty-four hours.”

Whatever Crawford had expected her to say, it clearly hadn’t been that.

“There’s a crime scene to process,” she continued. “I can testify as to what I saw Benton—the killer—doing, but any physical evidence that links him to the murders of the girls will need to be processed. What Dr. Lecter did to him will also need to be processed.”

After another moment, Crawford finally spoke.

“Nothing’s ever simple with you, Starling, is it?” He sighed. “I’ll find out who the lead agent was on the Minnesota case and get them up there to take point. Let’s get this done. I’ll yell at you when you get back.”

Clarice found her phone in a corner of the cabin’s main room, charging in an outlet behind the couch. She had seventeen missed calls, most from Ardelia, a few from Crawford, and several more from various Quantico extensions. There was also a string of texts from Ardelia that became increasingly worried when Clarice hadn’t shown up for work. Clarice knew that Crawford would have told Ardelia that she’d been found, and Clarice quickly texted her, apologizing for not explaining where she was going and promising to call as soon as she was able.

Her car keys were next to her phone. Clarice found her suitcase in her trunk where she had left it, and her gun and her holster underneath her jacket, which had been neatly placed in the passenger seat. She put on both, and then went back inside to talk to Jenkins.

He was eyeing the bloodstains on the floor when she walked in.

“FBI wants jurisdiction,” he said. “I’m not inclined to fight them. They already did quite a bit after what was going on here became serial murders.” He shook his head. “I just can’t believe it was Charlie, all this time.”

His voice held a sad sort of shock, but there was nothing of denial there. He was resigned, and Clarice recognized the signs of an officer who was compartmentalizing the best he could.

“It’s unlikely the FBI will want your department involved at all, given your connection to Benton, and his connection to the original investigations.”

Jenkins nodded. He told her that an FBI team was on its way, and then he and the officer went outside to put up police tape around the cabin.

Clarice blankly looked around the cabin, and then sat down in the kitchen chair she had used yesterday morning. She pulled out her phone and called Ardelia.

Ardelia answered on the first ring. “Oh my God, Clarice!”

“What did Crawford tell you?”

“That you went looking for Will Graham and actually found him! Why didn’t you tell me you had profiled him? And why did you go by yourself?”

Clarice swallowed. “How mad are you?”

“I’m not mad—exactly,” Ardelia said. “I just don’t understand.”

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to get involved. I knew if I told you about looking for him, you would want to help. I knew if I told you about coming here, you wouldn’t let me go alone. I’m sorry I lied, but I’m not sorry I kept you out of it.”

“Okay,” Ardelia said slowly, “but I still don’t understand why. You’ve never cared about sharing credit for something.”

“It wasn’t about credit. It was because I was afraid of getting you involved. I was looking for Dr. Lecter on my own time, and I wasn’t going to drag you into it. Part of me never expected to find anything. But if I did, I didn’t want to risk putting you in danger.”

“I’m an FBI agent, Clarice.”

“You are. But this wasn’t work. This was—personal.” She had sought to find Dr. Lecter because of her own interest, though at the time, she hadn’t quite realized how personal their connection was. But her main reason for not involving Ardelia was still the fact that Dr. Lecter was the definition of unpredictable. “I wasn’t going to drag you, or anyone, into a risky pet project that had the potential to go horribly wrong if it actually went anywhere.”

Ardelia was silent for a long moment. “Okay,” she finally said. “Don’t think we’re done talking about this, but Crawford is waving at me, and I have to go.”

They said their goodbyes, and then hung up.

It wasn’t long after that that the FBI arrived. Clarice introduced herself to the agent in charge, and asked what he wanted her to do. She was a witness and a part of this, and could in no way function as an agent on the crime scene. She gave him a basic description of what happened, telling him how she had come to be here, showing him how she had entered the cabin and what had happened in the living room, and how Will had turned the tables on her. One of the other agents came in and reported that the tools in the shed looked to have traces of blood on them, blood that would likely confirm Benton as the one who had killed the girls.

Clarice stayed at the scene during the preliminary setup, and then she drove her car back to town, stopping to get something to eat before meeting the agent in charge at the police station, where they used one of the private rooms for her formal statements. Crawford was present via speakerphone, though he left most of the questioning to the other agent. Clarice went in depth into her profile on Will and how it had led her here, and how it had collided with Benton and Will's own connection. She talked about Dr. Lecter, though she minimized his actions toward her as much as possible. Crawford was aware of her unusual history with Dr. Lecter, though no one else at the FBI was. Thankfully, the agent mainly seemed interested in wrapping up the Minnesota case, not getting involved in the Lecter case, which he somehow assumed that she was the lead agent on. Clarice didn't correct him; more noticeably, Crawford didn't correct him, either.

When the interview was over and there was nothing else she was needed for, Clarice started the long drive home. She drove until after dark, wanting to put as many miles between her and Minnesota as possible. The first thing she did after she checked into a hotel was take a long, hot shower, luxuriating in the feel of it. Afterward, she turned up the heat in the room and crawled into bed, the plain hotel mattress feeling better than it had any right to.

But instead of going immediately to sleep, Clarice turned on the bedside light, took a notebook out of her bag, and begin to write. She wrote down everything that had happened, every single detail that she could remember, every point of conversation that they had traded back and forth. She knew she needed to get it down while it was fresh in her mind, even though she was exhausted. Only after she was done did she turn out the light and go to bed.

The whole of the next day was spent driving. She arrived back at her apartment after dark, and didn't do much else besides have a long soak in the bath and go to bed.

Bright and early the morning after that, she was sitting in Crawford's office.

He was flipping through her profile of Will, even though he'd already heard a summation of it.

"Very interesting," he finally said, looking up. "And accurate, it seems."

"It seems," Clarice agreed.

He fixed her with a hard stare. "Want to tell me why you were working on this after I told you not to?"

"I don't have a good reason. I'm not going to try to justify my actions. I could say that you never said anything about investigating Will Graham, but that would just be semantics. Investigating one of them is the same as investigating the other." She paused. "I did leave it alone, for almost a year. It wasn't until I told Ardelia everything that happened in Belvedere that I really started thinking about it again. I was just going to draw up a profile as an exercise for myself, as a way of putting things behind me. But that intention got away from me."

"And when you actually started looking into cold cases?"

“I still felt like I was on a wild goose chase for a needle in a haystack. I thought about coming to you, several times, and giving you what I’d been working on, but I didn’t have enough evidence for any of my suppositions to be well-founded. My whole profile of Will was a gut instinct based on a conversation with a convicted serial killer.”

Crawford folded his hands. “You wanted to find hard evidence.”

“Yes. As soon as I found something substantial, I was going to bring it to you. I thought if I could convince you there was something worth looking at, we could get more people on this, maybe find a real pattern.” She paused. “I kept it a secret because I didn’t want to be shut down until I had something,” she admitted. “If you shut me down after I had something, well, then I would have done my best. You know, it’s actually sort of ironic.”

That seemed to surprise him. “How so?”

“You’ll forgive me for saying so, but in the past, you’ve sent agents after killers off the record, so to speak, encouraging them without actually giving them resources.”

Crawford’s gaze was stony, but he also didn’t deny it. He might not like it, but he could hardly find fault in her words, given that those actions had almost cost him his career.

“After I figured that out, I resolved that that wouldn’t be me, not again.” Then she laughed. “Except I did it to myself. I didn’t bring anyone else into something I was unofficially pursuing, but I still went off on my own, chasing down a lead.”

Crawford was silent a moment. “Except you’ve always gotten a different ending, where Hannibal is concerned,” he said slowly. “What else happened, besides what you said in the deposition? You might have saved Will’s life, but Hannibal isn’t the type to return kindness with kindness.”

Clarice nodded in acknowledgement. “He seemed pleased to see me. Surprised, but pleased. I think I was an amusing diversion, a bonus after a trying day.” She continued, telling Crawford more than had been on her official statement, while still skirting the details. “He seemed interested in me, the same way he had in Belvedere. After he took care of Will, he wanted to talk, so we talked. I told him what he wanted to know because it seemed in my best interests to do so. He wanted to know about my career so far in the FBI. He wanted to hear my profile of Will, and of course he wanted to discuss my killing Benton.” She shook her head. “I know he ate part of Benton, and fed him to Will as well. I don’t know when he mutilated Benton’s body. He told me how they had crossed paths with Benton. He thanked me for saving Will’s life, and said that since I had done so, he would be leaving me where I was. It was all very… polite, even though I was his prisoner.”

Crawford regarded her evenly. “One of the reasons I kept you from working on Hannibal’s case—not that there’s been much to work on—was because it seemed like you’d had a lucky escape, and I wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. I wasn’t going to do what I’d done before and keep pushing. You were too good an agent to lose trying to bring him in.” He paused, before continuing. “Everyone always thinks they’ll be the one to get him, but they either lose their lives or lose themselves. And I count myself in that,” he said seriously. “I lost

myself trying to catch Hannibal more than once." He focused on her intently as he steepled his fingers and pointed in her direction. "But you, you haven't lost anything."

"I lost him," Clarice said frankly. "I might have found him, but I never came close to catching him."

Crawford raised his brows, leaning back. "Did you want to catch him?"

"I want him caught because he needs to be caught. If you're asking if I ever entertained the notion of arresting him personally, absolutely not."

He nodded, looking at her thoughtfully. "Why do you think Hannibal didn't kill you?"

Clarice hid brutal honesty in sarcasm. "Because he likes me."

Crawford chuckled, shaking his head. "Hannibal doesn't *like* anyone. Not enough to prevent him from killing them."

She didn't respond. It was strange, the fact that she understood Dr. Lecter better than someone who had actually known him for years.

"I'm appointing you lead agent on the case."

"What?" She wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly.

"I'm giving you Hannibal Lecter's case. Don't misunderstand, he and Will won't be a day-to-day priority. I have every reason to believe they're already out of the country. It could be months or years before we have another lead on them. But when we do, it's yours to run point on."

Clarice was stunned. "I don't know what to say. Out of all the things I expected, this wasn't one of them."

"What did you expect?"

"A lot more yelling, for one."

Crawford briefly smiled. "I've had two days to think about it. If you'd been here earlier, there would have been yelling." Then he said, "I'm actually very impressed. Not that you worked on your own, but that you were able to take a hunch and follow it through to create a sound criminal profile. That's the kind of thing that can't be taught. You've either got it, or you don't, and you've got it."

"Thank you, sir. But you know my profile isn't going to work again. You know Will is too smart to make the same mistake twice, not now that he knows we're onto him."

"Maybe so," Crawford said. "But he'll make a different mistake. And when he does, I want you in place to find it. Next time you have a crazy hunch, come to me and I'll hear you out. I won't even tell you to stop working on it, even if I don't immediately assign anyone else to help you."

“Thank you, sir.” Clarice nodded. “I will.” She felt almost like she had gotten a promotion. “May I ask what’s changed? You don’t think I’ll lose anything now?”

Crawford exhaled. “I’m getting too old for this, Clarice. Every time I’ve tried to catch Hannibal, it’s gone sideways. Worse than sideways, in some cases. I’m not that far away from retirement. And I’m done trying to find Hannibal Lecter. It seems to me that the best person to find him is someone who does things differently. And maybe next time, you will lose. But it’s not my call to make anymore. It’s yours.”

Clarice didn’t really do much at work that day, besides catching up on what she had fallen behind on.

She met with Crawford once again, regarding the shooting of Benton. While it was too soon to say anything official, Crawford had said plenty that was unofficial. Clarice had been prepared for a hard review of her lethal force encounter, but Crawford had bluntly said that no one was going to care that she had shot to kill in the moment, not when it came to a serial killer who was dismembering teenage girls. It wasn’t that Clarice had wanted a reprimand, since as she’d told Will, she didn’t feel guilty for making the only call that she could have made. But she had also been prepared to accept the consequences of her actions, given that she had been upfront about having shot Benton based on unreliable information.

Clarice also checked Tattle Crime, and was relieved to see that no story regarding anything in Minnesota was posted. If one hadn’t been up by this point, it seemed unlikely that there was going to be one. Either Will had seen the story break in Minnesota and had never contacted Freddie, or the story had already broken by the time he’d contacted her, and Freddie herself hadn’t seen the need to fly to Minnesota if she wasn’t going to have a scoop.

Clarice hadn’t seen Ardelia all day except once, when Ardelia had come by her desk asking if Clarice wanted her to get takeout to bring over. Clarice had accepted, and now they sat in Clarice’s kitchen, beginning their meal.

Ardelia had had time to get the whole story, even though Clarice hadn’t seen her until now. She had listened to the recording of the conference call with Crawford, when Clarice had been interviewed, and she had read the reports. Ardelia knew everything that had happened on the surface. But Clarice knew Ardelia had been waiting to talk to her about it in person and in private.

Clarice picked up her fork. “You were right,” she said.

“About what?”

“I am an expert on Hannibal Lecter.”

Ardelia shook her head at the name. “I can’t believe you were in a house with him overnight. What was that even *like*?”

“It was the most polite hostage situation you could imagine.”

“Clarice, be serious.”

“I am. It was the most surreal experience of my entire life.”

“But what *happened*? I know there has to be more than what was in the report.”

Clarice looked at Ardelia, pressing her lips together. “If I tell you, you can never tell anyone. Not Crawford, not anyone. Ever.”

Ardelia paled. “Jesus, Clarice, what did Lecter *do* to you?”

“Nothing,” Clarice said, shrugging. “Not a damn thing.”

“And that’s a secret?”

“I think it might be.”

Over dinner, she told Ardelia everything. How Dr. Lecter had been genuinely delighted to see her and all the things he’d asked her. How she had sat down to dinner with him but hadn’t been forced to partake. How they had had a conversation while she watched him eat the man she’d killed. How she’d gotten intoxicated and almost been rude, and how nothing had come of it. How she had slept in a bed with an unconscious Will Graham. How she hadn’t tried to get away the times she was untied because she knew she couldn’t. How Will had rolled his eyes and told her to find something to eat in the kitchen. How the three of them had had a conversation, and how she’d realized she had nothing to fear from Dr. Lecter.

Ardelia had begun to look stunned partway into Clarice’s account, but by the end, she was dumbfounded.

After Clarice finished, Ardelia said, “I knew there was something you weren’t saying, but I never imagined it could be all that. Jesus.” She shook her head. “You know, I was going to be mad at you for taking off on your own, but never mind. I can’t be mad at someone whose last two days looked like that.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“Not that bad? Weren’t you *worried*? You spent a night with two serial killers.”

“It’s Dr. Lecter you have to navigate. Will is easy in comparison.”

Ardelia was incredulous. “Easy?”

“I don’t mean that he’s not formidable. He is, and he will absolutely manipulate you into doing whatever best serves his own interests. But Will Graham is never going to be fine with you one minute and slide a knife into you the next. He doesn’t operate with Dr. Lecter’s whimsy and he doesn’t kill for convenience. He has too much empathy for that.”

When Ardelia didn't respond, Clarice answered her first question. "I was worried at first. Even though I didn't think Dr. Lecter was going to kill me, I had no idea what was going to happen. It was unnerving knowing he was in the house, knowing I couldn't get away. But the longer I played nice, the more obvious it became that he wasn't playing. Well, he's always playing," she corrected herself, "but he wasn't waiting for me to slip up, waiting for an excuse to change his behavior toward me. And after that, I wasn't worried anymore."

"Are you worried now?" Ardelia looked at her seriously, raising a brow. "Yes, it's better for him to like you than dislike you, but doesn't the fact that he likes you worry you? You've got a psychopath sending you Christmas cards, a psychopath *enjoying* seeing you."

Clarice was aware how strange it all sounded, and she knew she looked naive for insisting that it really was fine. But she also knew that she was right. "I'm not worried. I know where it starts and I know where it ends. I'll agree that things would be simpler if Dr. Lecter and I had never met. But since we did, this is the best possible outcome." It almost seemed an impossible outcome, but here they were.

Ardelia sighed. "I guess I'll have to take your word for it. I don't understand it, but you do, don't you?"

"I suppose I do."

She sighed again. "All kidding aside, you should have taken me with you."

"I never expected to find anything in Minnesota," Clarice said. "I really didn't. I didn't consider it dangerous to go by myself. The most I hoped for was that someone had seen Will months ago."

"But don't you see?" Ardelia said, leaning forward. "If I'd been with you, we could have gotten him. Will Graham couldn't have gotten the drop on both of us."

"If you'd been with me, we would have gotten Will Graham," Clarice conceded. "But Dr. Lecter only came to the cabin because Will called him. If we had gotten Will, we wouldn't have gotten Dr. Lecter, and that would have been a disaster."

Even if they had arrested Will, Clarice wasn't sure it would have amounted to anything. He had aiding and abetting charges against him, but those would have been hard to convict on without more evidence.

"I didn't expect to find anything," Clarice repeated. "At the same time, I knew that the worst thing that could happen was that I would actually see them, and I couldn't have you along if that happened. Because I know that whatever partiality Dr. Lecter has for me would not extend to anyone who happened to be with me. And I couldn't risk that."

Ardelia slowly nodded. After a moment, she said, "Crawford said something interesting yesterday. He said that everyone who's been touched by Hannibal Lecter has a black stain on them. Except you." She paused. "He actually said that. So I suppose, if the worst thing you've done because of Hannibal Lecter is lie to me to keep me away from him, then I can forgive you for that."

“I’m sorry I lied. I’m sorry all this happened the way it did.”

“I was so worried when we couldn’t find you, when you didn’t answer your phone and didn’t come to work, when you weren’t at home, either. I thought something had happened on your trip, something like a car accident or worse. At noon when we still hadn’t heard from you, Crawford had your phone traced. I couldn’t imagine what you were doing in Minnesota. After I talked to you, I got so angry that you had made me so worried, that it was all because you had lied about where you were going.

“But then I started to think about what actually happened to you, and I just wished I had been with you.” Then she shook her head. “But now? I don’t know.” Ardelia slowly exhaled. “I am the one who called you an expert on Hannibal Lecter. Maybe I should just take my own advice and let you deal with him.” She gave Clarice a dry smile. “Save the rest of us a lot of trouble. Speaking of which, I heard Crawford gave you the case.”

“He did.”

“Congratulations,” Ardelia said, smiling wider. “I mean it.”

Clarice smiled in turn. “Thank you.”

Time passed.

Days began to form weeks, and the routine of normal life resumed.

There was never a sign of Dr. Lecter or Will Graham anywhere. They had slipped away once again.

Clarice submitted a formal profile of Will, and it was now officially part of the case file. She still kept her personal notebooks that detailed her various experiences with Dr. Lecter and Will, and she spent one evening putting her original notebook back together, arranging the pages that she had torn out when she was first constructing her profile.

As she put the notebooks away, she considered that she hadn’t done what she’d initially set out to do, which was to profile Dr. Lecter. She had thought all along that she hadn’t understood him, and that was the thing she’d been most wrong about.

It hadn’t surprised her, however, that Dr. Lecter would be interested in what she would write about him. And while she had struggled before on where to even begin with a profile of him, he had given her the obvious answer. She had perspectives of him that no one else had, and experiences that were hers alone.

Clarice resolved that she would write something. But it wouldn’t be official. It would be for closure, almost like a letter she would never send.

This had all started with a profile of Dr. Lecter; it was only fitting that she properly end things by writing one.

She worked on the profile over the next few days, finally finishing it to her satisfaction. It really couldn't even be called a proper profile, being only several paragraphs long and not in any particular format. But she had written it for herself, and she had found the words for what she wanted to say. It was an abstraction of her interactions with Dr. Lecter and a unique reflection of her understanding.

Clarice momentarily wished she'd had the opportunity to discuss it with him.

Then she got over it, closed the profile in a notebook, and went to do other things.

The next day, almost as if the universe had timed it, Clarice received a padded envelope in her mail at the FBI.

She knew who it was from the moment she picked it up, even though there was nothing distinguishing about it. It had the hallmarks of a letter from Dr. Lecter—a plainly typed address and a postmark from what was probably a mailing service in another country. Clarice couldn't imagine what he could be sending her besides correspondence, and she hesitated a moment before opening the envelope. When she did, she found a card and a small rectangular box.

She opened the card first, where there was a brief note in Dr. Lecter's flowing script.

Clarice,

I must again express my gratitude to you for the service you did us. During our recent travels, I chanced upon the enclosed and my thoughts turned to you. A bird in flight is always a marvel to behold; I find myself compelled to watch until it rises out of sight. I send this to you as a gesture of my thanks, though it pales in comparison to what you have returned to me. But the world is a curious place, and perhaps another time I will be able to repay the favor in a more fitting manner.

Sincerely yours,

Hannibal Lecter

Clarice set the card down and opened the box.

Inside was a necklace of white gold, a thin chain with a pendant no bigger than a dime suspended from it. The pendant was a silhouette of a bird in flight—undoubtedly selected for her because of her surname.

The necklace wasn't ostentatious or ornate, and it was, maddeningly, something she would have worn. Of course, she wasn't going to wear it, given its provenance, but Clarice found herself oddly irritated that he had picked out what was essentially a perfect gift.

The sentiment behind the gesture was genuine, even if Dr. Lecter had to know that she wouldn't actually wear the necklace. She suspected that he would also know that she

wouldn’t get rid of it. It was a gift, and she would keep it, the same way she now kept the Christmas cards, tucked away in a chest, never displayed but always present.

Clarice looked at the pendant a moment more, before sighing and putting both the box and the card into her purse.

For the first time, she actually wondered if they would meet again. It seemed unlikely, but so did most things about their association.

But she didn’t reflect on the idea for long. Whatever happened, she would deal with it as it came. That was the best she could do.

Clarice was focusing on the present day. As for what the future held, she supposed only time would tell.

—*the end*

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